

**OBAMA IN AFGHANISTAN: STRATEGY AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN
AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR**

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the faculty of Air University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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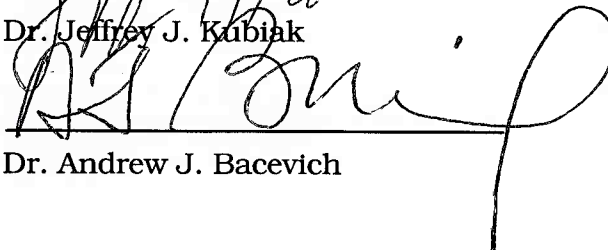
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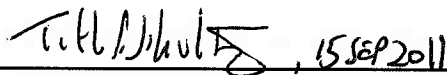
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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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ABSTRACT

As military strategy changes over the course of a prolonged conflict, the validity of the strategy (the appropriateness of ends and logic of means) becomes a subject of increasing debate and doubt. As leaders try to sustain the political legitimacy of their strategy, other elites may place greater emphasis on an often neglected aspect of strategic discourse: the equity of the process of making strategy, defined as its relative public transparency and the inclusion of autonomous participants in debate and decision-making. It therefore may be useful to consider strategy in a prolonged war of change as a critical discourse in which a growing number of elites demand a more thorough and open discussion of the strategy in order to support it.

The idea of strategy as critical discourse is used to explain the struggles of the Obama administration to change the strategy in Afghanistan and perceptions of that strategy at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Separate chapters describe elite treatment of the dominant forms of discourse at each level: a Cabinet-level internal policy debate at the strategic level, counterinsurgency doctrine at the operational level, and “war stories” at the tactical level. In each case, the dominant form of discourse operated in a way that obscured or avoided basic questions of validity while foreclosing opportunities for greater equity. Although this approach to discourse has the virtues of political expediency, the Afghanistan case suggests that sustaining long wars may require an approach to strategic decision-making and communication that is more transparent and inclusive.

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INTRODUCTION

This book emphasizes the importance of being transparent and honest about the troubled relationship between American strategy and the country's chosen forms of communication. It is therefore important to begin this extended act of communication with a frank assessment of my own inspirations.

Washington is filled with ideological manifestos and personal recriminations in academic garb. It would be easy to lump this study in that category, because what follows began as an emotional reaction to a series of disappointments. Since the terrorists attacks of 11 September 2001, a good deal of my time has been spent at the edge of public discussions on the various strategies the United States has adopted in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the public affairs officer for Sixteenth Air Force, I provided oversight for communication programs tied to European-based air operations supporting the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The following year, I moved to Baghdad's Green Zone as a communication planner for the Coalition Provisional Authority under Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III and then the newly established US Embassy under Ambassador John D. Negroponte. In 2009, I served in Kabul as one of two people coordinating news media activities for the commander of the International Security Assistance Force, General Stanley A. McChrystal.

As a minor participant in these controversial military operations, I never met a government official or reporter who woke up in the morning with the intent to make their part of the world more chaotic and erode American

credibility in the process. The people who made and implemented American strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan—and the people who opposed that strategy—were not exceptionally stupid, ignorant, arrogant, or selfish, but their words and deeds were invariably described in this way by the other side. What I came to believe was that people with good intentions were trapped in a dysfunctional process of talking about each other. This book is an attempt to explore that initial impression.

There are significant risks and limitations in this approach. Lacking a well-established model for analyzing the specific connections between military strategy and public debate, I have developed a hybrid I call *critical discourse theory*. I have applied this theory to just one case—US strategy in Afghanistan during the first two years of Barack Obama’s presidency—because the theory and the case are both complex enough to warrant consideration at book length. Therefore, I am not attempting to demonstrate that critical discourse theory explains how strategy works in all cases. I am merely suggesting that the theory is a useful lens for explaining the most prominent features of the American experience in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010. I leave it to others to determine whether the theory has broader value.

Closer to home, my personal involvement in the Afghanistan operation leaves me open to the charge that I am trying to use the book to justify controversial policies or actions, avoid responsibility for mistakes, or settle personal scores. In defense, I can only offer the work itself, which I feel is fairly even-handed in spreading both blame and credit for the quality of discourse among various politicians, diplomats, commanders, reporters, and editors, either individually or as a group. I freely admit that I am one of many people

who have marred strategy in recent years by making poor communication choices. It has not been an easy decade for anyone associated with American foreign policy, and those who have labored in those fields have my sympathy, respect, and loyalty, from presidents to privates.

To a large extent, however, holding specific people accountable for bad strategy or bad public discourse is beside the point. History may seek to establish personal responsibility for failures, but strategy cannot move forward by focusing on the past. To the extent that strategists look at the Obama administration's initial approach to Afghanistan today, they need to be concerned with how that case might explain the relationships between what inevitably will be a different set of decision makers and the systems of power and influence they inhabit. The application of critical discourse theory to US policy in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 is one attempt to describe why someone who was *not* Obama or McChrystal would have faced public struggles similar to theirs. The fault for the current state of American strategy lies in ourselves as well as our stars, but I am more interested in the latter.

Throughout this study, I have relied on sources widely available to most scholars rather than my direct experiences, the gist of classified intelligence, or personal relationships with actors in the Afghan drama. In part, this approach is dictated by critical discourse theory, which emphasizes the public aspects of making strategy. My approach is also an acknowledgement that any bias introduced by my role as a participant in the Afghan war needs to be balanced by enabling others to verify evidence or to point out errors in my interpretation. The few exceptions to the policy of using widely available evidence—identified in the footnotes—are communication initiatives that received relatively little public

attention or anonymous comments in which journalists who covered Afghanistan provided me with frank assessments of the quality of their reporting. In most cases, this information can be cross-checked against other sources or studies to which scholars have access.

From a historical perspective, some will argue that there is too little public information about the decisions of a sitting president or the results of an ongoing military operation to reach convincing conclusions about the strategy at the distance of only a few months. I am under no illusions that my study represents the last word on the Obama administration's involvement in Afghanistan. However, one implication of critical discourse theory is that what many people inside and outside government say publicly about what is happening *now* may be more consequential to the direction of strategy than information and explanations that will emerge as more time passes. Strategy is made in the moment, and there is some value in examining it from a critical position close to that moment.

The book is organized into six chapters. The first discusses strategy as a process in which meaning is continually revised in a way that *the* strategy only can be understood as a series of plans and different interpretations of those plans. Many people may find this argument obvious, but it is here because many practitioners still treat strategy as a product that is somehow finalized by its codification in a decision paper, campaign plan, or policy speech. In particular, the concept of *strategic communication* sometimes presumes that there is *a* strategy that should define the form and content of all official communication. Yet even General Dwight D. Eisenhower—who as the commander of the European theater in World War II enjoyed more agreement

on the nature, scope, and importance his mission than most American officers before or since—found cause to complain in his memoirs that the official strategy to defeat Germany was being rushed and misdirected by the “impatience of the public [that] clearly demonstrated a complete lack of appreciation of the problems involved.”¹ In a policy era characterized by less agreement and more urgency, leaders cannot expect communication to represent a one-way flow of meaning from static and fully comprehensible guidance. Communication is best understood as a process of action and reaction from which we derive a shifting conception of problems and solutions.

The more controversial contention made in the opening chapter is that the goal of strategy as a process is greater consensus on a plan of action among people with the power to achieve the outcomes envisioned by the strategy—an objective I term *elite ownership*. The second chapter argues that such ownership derives from elite perceptions of legitimacy embedded in the process of making and explaining strategy. Using several brief historical examples, I break down the concept of legitimacy into two essential elements. The one that normally receives the most attention is *validity*—the moral, emotional, and rational alignment of ends and means by individuals or groups with the authority to make such decisions. The second, less appreciated element is *equity*, which is concerned not with whether a given strategy is right but whether the process used to develop that strategy is fair. Equity requires a reasonable degree of inclusiveness, transparency, and autonomy to help those debating issues to engage on a more or less equal basis. Although pure equity is impossible to achieve in practice, decisions about ownership hinge on

¹ Eisenhower (1948), 52.

approximations of equity whenever elites have difficulty reaching conclusions about validity.

The case study covers three chapters that consider discourse on American military action in Afghanistan at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. This division of the analysis is somewhat arbitrary, but it emphasizes how different groups of elites with the ability to affect strategy employ different forms of discourse in describing their thoughts and actions. At the strategic level, the conversation on Afghanistan was driven by an internal policy discussion among a small group of senior US officials. The outcome of that discussion was operationalized among thousands of troops, diplomats, and aid workers through a variety of means, the most important of which was a specific vision of integrated state activity embodied in the counterinsurgency doctrine popularized by military officers and academics after 9/11. At the tactical level, the daily effects of the strategy were captured by the first-person perspectives of soldiers, Afghans, and reporters in the field. The final chapter interprets the struggle for legitimacy at each level, and suggests what government leaders might do to improve discourse on strategy.

During the 18 years I have served as a military public affairs officer, I have seen three common errors in proposals to improve the ways in which the United States discusses its actions abroad. The first concludes that getting more people to sign on to America's foreign policy objectives is basically a question of building more effective mechanisms to market strategic choices to a diverse global audience. The second fallacy—in many ways the opposite of the first—is that public ignorance and the contentious nature of information media makes productive communication about policy a fool's errand. Communication,

in this second view, is a matter of avoiding political risk in ways that allow certain elites to work their will. A final, more aloof approach suggests that the attention paid to saying the right things distracts from policy makers' ability to do the right things. Focus on planning and executing a sound national strategy, some argue, and political support for the strategy will follow.

Each of these three common cures for the ills of contemporary strategic discourse derives from the misperception that leaders can advance a single, simple, and manifestly valid interpretation of a strategy and its outcomes. Defining the right things for a state to attempt and achieve is a continuously contested and thus an inherently political act. However useful it may be for decision makers to claim a separation between an objectively conceived military strategy and subjective political wrangling, in reality no such separation exists. Indeed, claims of political neutrality often serve to give the individuals or institutions making those claims—primarily the military and news media—more power over the direction and interpretation of strategy. A truly apolitical approach to strategy would reject any one perspective on the legitimacy of a proposed course of action in favor of a process that accommodates multiple and narratively complex perspectives.

The theory of strategy as critical discourse avoids the temptation to assume away the problem of defining an acceptable political frame for military action. Better communication about strategy cannot rest on agreements about the purpose or limits of an operation that seldom exist. Nor should policy makers assure themselves that their actions will speak louder than their words. The idea that a few dozen people in the White House or the Pentagon can create and communicate an effective strategy in wars of choice is fatally flawed.

However intelligent and well informed Washington's planners and analysts may be, they are part of a relatively small and heterogeneous community that does not know the exact course to follow in a crisis because they do not share the views of the relatively large and diverse groups of actors who must back Washington's plans. In such a situation, the path to a more convincing strategy lies not in winning the argument but in a willingness to continue arguing.



CHAPTER 1

WARS OF CHOICE AND CHANGE: STRATEGY AS A PROCESS

This is an aspect of military science which needs to be studied above all others in the Armed Forces: the capacity to adapt oneself to the utterly unpredictable, the entirely unknown. I am tempted indeed to declare dogmatically that whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on now, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What does matter is their capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives.

— Sir Michael Howard
“*Military Science in an Age of Peace*,” 3 October 1973²

For more than six decades, the United States has had a problem describing the kinds of wars it fights. They have been called *limited* or *small* wars to contrast them with the greater perils and sacrifices that characterized World War II. Yet conflicts that have killed 120,000 Americans, wounded nearly 300,000 more, and consumed 50 to 75 percent of the government’s discretionary funds over 23 years of fighting are not limited or small, even in an objective sense.³ *Low-intensity* compounds the problem of related terms by demeaning the subjective experience of those who lived and died in merciless places from the Chosin Reservoir to the Ia Drang Valley and from Fallujah to

² Howard (1974).

³ Casualty numbers from Leland and Oboroceanu (2010). Updated statistics for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from <http://icasualties.org>. Budget estimates from Hormats (2007), 288.

the Korengal. It is not very useful to talk of *irregular* or *asymmetric* wars as opposed to some ideal type that is less common, however more agreeable that ideal may be to the inherent purpose of a defense force or the doctrinal or budgetary preferences of military organizations.

America's recent wars are best described as wars of choice and change, based on compelling but debatable interests that vary with time. The Korean War began as an intervention against communist North Korea's invasion of its autocratic but anti-communist southern neighbor, transitioned to a brief effort to unify the peninsula, and then stumbled through bloody, protracted wrangling to reach a stalemate that continues today. United States intervention in South Vietnam was characterized by a more gradual escalation from military assistance to full-blown operations against both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's army and National Liberation Front insurgents, followed by another costly effort to coerce a resolution favorable to America's withdrawal, ending in the South's ultimate collapse.

After an interval dotted with brief military adventures in places such as Grenada and Panama, the 1991 Persian Gulf War ejected Iraq from Kuwait, entertained hopes for an Iraqi revolution, but settled for a prolonged effort to contain Saddam Hussein's regime with military, economic, and diplomatic pressure. American policy reversed course with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in which Hussein's quick overthrow trapped US forces in a civil war between Sunni and Shia rebels. In Afghanistan, America's longest war began in 2001 as retaliation for the 9/11 attacks, an effort "to eliminate al Qaeda" and "to terminate [the] rule of current Taliban leadership to make an example of them"

as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁴ Ten years later, although al Qaeda remained the primary rhetorical target of US strategy, preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven had come to mean fortifying a shaky Afghan government and its security forces against a Pashtun insurgency supported from within Pakistan.

At some point in each of these cases, the United States had the wrong strategy, and Americans paid the price for their leaders' sluggishness in recognizing and responding to change. More importantly, each of these cases informed the strategic biases of rising elites in ways that made successful adaptation less likely in the future. This pattern can be seen in the way that civil-military relations from the Korean War to the present have affected strategic choices, although similar outlines are also discernible with respect to ideology and other factors distinguishing groups of elites.

Military disillusionment after Korea crested with humiliation in Vietnam, prompting the generation of generals responsible for Desert Storm to insist on avoiding past mistakes by applying overwhelming force in pursuit of strictly limited and widely supported objectives.⁵ This position was known alternately as the Weinberger Doctrine—after Caspar Weinberger, President Ronald Reagan's secretary of defense—or the Powell Doctrine—after General Colin Powell, Weinberger's *protégé* and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations. The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine suffered from the inconclusive results of the Persian Gulf War and the uncertainty of American interests and values in comparison to the preeminence of American power after the Soviet Union's collapse. Civilian policy elites

⁴ Feith (2001).

⁵ Kitfield (2005).

increasingly acted on their concerns that the military had become too cautious in circumstances that required a more aggressive foreign policy. Madeleine Albright, Clinton's second secretary of state, became convinced that "the lessons of Vietnam could be learned too well," and she famously challenged the military's reluctance to intervene against the ethnic slaughter in the former Yugoslavia by asking Powell, "What are you saving this superb military for, Colin, if we can't use it?"⁶

By the time Donald Rumsfeld returned to the Pentagon as secretary of defense under President George W. Bush in 2001, this civilian skepticism had hardened into an assertion of control over military advice and planning. Against the advice of senior officers and Powell, now secretary of state, the United States launched ambitious operations in Afghanistan and Iraq with a deliberately small numbers of troops.⁷ Perceptions of civilian mismanagement of these wars may prompt another *never again* backlash from the armed forces. "The military officer belongs to a profession upon whose members are conferred great responsibility, a code of ethics, and an oath of office," one Marine argued in a recent issue of the Pentagon-published *Joint Forces Quarterly*. "These grant him moral autonomy and obligate him to disobey an order he deems immoral"—a responsibility which, in the dawn of a new era of military resentment, requires serving "as a check on the potentially disastrous decisions of men less capable than Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill."⁸

Reflecting in 1979 on a quarter-century of Democratic and Republican policy toward Vietnam, Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts argued

⁶ Albright (2003), 182.

⁷ Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (2006), 41-43 and 96-100.

⁸ Milburn (2010), 102-104.

... America needs no new doctrines. New doctrines consecrate new truths, and new truths create new certainties, new compulsions—a new framework of necessity. Anything that becomes necessary to do in the first place becomes virtually impossible to undo thereafter.⁹

This study proceeds from the premise that failure in wars of change results in large part from considering strategy as the product of a doctrine validated by past experience. Instead, it is better to treat strategy as a *process*—one specifically designed to make the most productive possible use of elite bickering and to reduce the chance that disagreements will solidify into dysfunctional policies. Former US State Department planning chief Richard Haas made a related point in 2008 when he suggested that strategists who “think that policy design is the big thing” are mistaken. “The truth is that while policy design is necessary it is not anywhere near sufficient. Policy marketing is really where the rubber meets the road.”¹⁰ What Haas did not account for in this remark is the fact that policies might be negotiated more than marketed, implying the need to adapt policy in order to sell it.

Examining strategy as a process gives due respect to the two dilemmas posed by the wars of choice and change. The first dilemma relates to how strategists select or revise their plans as emerging conditions limit the available methods and test the values and issues at stake in the conflict. In his theory of asymmetric conflict, Ivan Arreguín-Toft—expanding on previous work by Andrew J. R. Mack and others—concludes that strong state actors lose to weaker actors for two reasons. The strong actor may enter a war unprepared to face an asymmetric threat. If so, adopting a more successful strategy requires

⁹ Gelb and Betts (1979), 362-363.

¹⁰ Haas, “Is Policy Planning Possible at the Present Moment?” (2008).

time and resources that may not be available as perceptions of failure break down consensus on the cause and conduct of the war. Alternatively, the strong actor may apply a strategy of barbarism that promotes tactical victories through overwhelming force but eventually generates moral resistance or sanctions sufficient for a strategic loss.¹¹

The second dilemma facing strategists involves the difficulty of effectively representing progress to concerned elites and the public as their perceptions of threats, interests, and values change. Everett Carl Dolman has argued that measuring success in war and thereby legitimating military action depends on the type of war the state is fighting. In total wars, effectiveness is the primary measure, since any means is justified when the end is survival. During more limited wars, efficiency becomes the primary path to legitimacy, since survival interests are supplanted by negotiable state interests that may be weighed against the perceived costs of action. In the case of peacekeeping, humanitarian interventions, and similar operations, objective measures of cost cannot be reconciled with the subjective values at stake. Legitimacy thus becomes more firmly enmeshed with questions of morality: is the state prosecuting the war in the right way, and is state action doing more good than harm?¹²

These two dilemmas derive from the fact that strategy is formulated and executed among multiple parties in a public context characterized by uncertainty, elevated moral risk, and constrained choices. Such negotiation is undeniably *substantive*—strategy must after all propose to do something—but it

¹¹ Arreguín-Toft (2005), 221-222.

¹² Dolman, "Military Intelligence and the Problem of Legitimacy: Opening the Model" (2000).

is also *procedural*. The great Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously defined war as “a continuation of political intercourse [*Politik*], with the addition of other means.”¹³ Colin Gray argues that it is “useful to retain the ambiguity from Clausewitz’s German original and regard strategy as the product and agent not only of political purpose, or policy, but also of political contention, or policy process. If strategy is the agent of policy, so policy is the product of an ongoing political process, just as strategy itself is the product of an ongoing strategy-making process.”¹⁴ Before describing the purpose and nature of strategy as a process, it is useful to consider three brief historical vignettes that illustrate distinct ways in which strategists might deal with political contention.

Three Approaches to Political Contention: Convince, Connive, or Contend

Hearst Against Spain: Convince Elites by Selling the War. What some see as a new chapter in American imperialism at the dawn of this century rejuvenated popular interest in the country’s path from isolationism to empire at the end of the 1800’s. Those inclined to see that progression as a duping of the American public find their prophet in William Randolph Hearst, publisher of the *New York Journal* and other influential newspapers of the era.¹⁵ Hearst’s papers beat the drum of outrage at Spanish depredations during the first three years of the Cuban revolution until the United States declared war on Spain in

¹³ Clausewitz (trans. 1976), 605.

¹⁴ Gray (1999), 30.

¹⁵ The warmongering role of Hearst and his rival Joseph Pulitzer is a common starting point for studies of American propaganda. See, for example, Brewer (2009), 18-19; also Secunda and Moran (2007), 13-14.

April 1898—launching what became in some respects, as Hearst boasted, “the *Journal’s* war.”¹⁶ Not content to goad President William McKinley to action in Cuba and the Philippines, the *Journal* printed fabricated news about the massacre of Westerners in Peking in the hopes of encouraging a military expedition there in 1900.¹⁷ Famously, Hearst is reported to have told his illustrator Frederic Remington, in response to a telegram about the lack of excitement in Cuba, “You furnish the pictures, and I’ll furnish the war.”¹⁸

Hearst’s solution to political contention was essentially a strategy of message control. The debate fell to the party who talked loudest and longest, employing an arsenal of rhetorical, visual, and emotional appeals with only necessary deference to truth and reason. Most people were sheep, and those who were not would often follow the rest of the flock out of their own political or social self-interest. Political contention therefore could be muted or overcome by direct appeals to an ignorant and gullible public. Consensus on strategy was a question of selling the war in a big way.

If Hearst and his peers sold American elites on war in 1898 as he boasted, however, it was in many quarters a difficult sale. Although a majority of Americans may have been indifferent to the war or supported it weakly through a vague sense of national unity or destiny, the conflict was deliberately opposed by an Anti-Imperialist League with 500,000 members—including a diverse group of political, industrial, and cultural leaders such as Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, Andrew Carnegie, Samuel Gompers, Eugene V. Debs, William James, Carl Schurz, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Jane

¹⁶ Boot (2002), 69.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Secunda and Moran (2007), 14.

Addams, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain.¹⁹ Even as most reporters covering the war supported imperialist positions, others such as John Bass from *Harper's Weekly* published accounts of military incompetence or barbarity that dogged senior officers for the rest of their lives.²⁰ Although many American soldiers and citizens were openly contemptuous of the “gorillas” and “niggers” taking up arms in Spain’s former colonies, genuine press and public condemnation of atrocities committed against Filipinos during the Samar campaign led to a string of courts-martial with mild disciplinary results that nevertheless stained individual reputations and the subsequent history of the war.²¹ Isolationism remained a formidable intellectual and emotional barrier to US intervention in World War I. The history of the Spanish-American War therefore indicates that message control has only a limited ability to convince elites or reduce opposition within a political process.

Nixon in Vietnam: Connive Against Elites to Exercise Power.

Although he never used the term “secret plan,” President Richard M. Nixon campaigned in 1968 on vague assurances that he somehow would end the Vietnam War without losing it—a tall order, given divisions inside and outside Washington on the value and prospects of fighting on for an honorable peace.²² In his recent consideration of the end of the Vietnam War, Gideon Rose observes that the Nixon administration’s procedural approach to managing elite contention was “decentralizing power in the hands of the president and his closest advisers.”²³ Charitably, this was a means of minimizing bureaucracy

¹⁹ Linn (2000), 11. Secunda and Moran (2007), 22. Brewer (2009), 28-29.

²⁰ Linn (2000), 132-136.

²¹ Linn (2000), 36, 321 and 327. Boot (2002), 122-123. Dower (1986), 151.

²² Brands (1993), 118.

²³ Rose (2010), 175.

through “a system in which the White House framed questions from above and asked for raw information.”²⁴ It was also a “secretive, byzantine” process resulting in “constant infighting ... displaying a ruthlessness, pettiness, and paranoia worthy of the Borgias.”²⁵

Nevertheless, Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, enjoyed exceptional autonomy as senior strategists, which they used to great advantage. More than many other wartime presidents, Nixon was able to plan and execute synchronized military, diplomatic, and information activities in pursuit of the coherent if arguable proposition that “bold offensive maneuvers and threats of future punishment were necessary to make progress in the negotiations with the North Vietnamese.”²⁶ The president enjoyed “a good deal of power to ‘manage’ the news”—both through well-timed appeals for public patience, such as his “silent majority” speech of 3 November 1969, and through leak-resistant military planning processes that were so secretive that, in the case of air operations, they excluded the secretary and chief of staff of the Air Force.²⁷ Together, Rose argues, the two men gave “the public what it wanted most: a steady reduction in American casualties and general involvement in the war.”²⁸

Nixon and Kissinger’s ability to work in, around, and through the political system is a powerful argument for the *realpolitik* they practiced. National security required clarity of purpose and action. The path toward certain victory or away from certain defeat was to do whatever it took to exercise

²⁴ Ibid., 176.

²⁵ Ibid., 175-176.

²⁶ Ibid., 179.

²⁷ Quote from Hallin (1986), 10. See also Hammond (1996), 73, and Rose (2010), 184.

²⁸ Rose (2010), 184.

all available political and military power toward necessary but achievable ends. Political opposition was the price of doing business, easily overwhelmed and then forgotten when executives wielded their power judiciously but decisively to achieve the best possible outcomes.

But as Rose and others note, Nixon and America paid a heavy and enduring price for the administration's freedom. Nixon's chosen "endgame took as long, and cost as many U.S. casualties, as the entire preceding American intervention"—to say nothing of the damage done to the Vietnamese people.²⁹ In addition, secrecy did not always improve the effectiveness of military operations. For example, Nixon was so concerned about the propaganda value of communists exposing his secret bombing campaign in Laos by downing a B-52 that he banned heavy bomber strikes in the vicinity of surface-to-air missile sites, leading to a surge in enemy air defenses and more dangerous bombing missions over Laos.³⁰ More importantly, such secrecy was usually ineffective, since reporters and the president's political opponents had ready access to information from independent witnesses, administration insiders, disgruntled government whistle-blowers, and North Vietnamese apologists.

Tactically, secrecy worked against Nixon by feeding cynical and angry attitudes toward his administration and its military and diplomatic representatives. Government deceptions and silence forced media elites to rely more heavily on leaks, nongovernment sources, and enemy propaganda. The content and tenor of the news from Washington and Saigon led Nixon officials and their South Vietnamese counterparts farther away from cooperating with reporters and improving the flow of information to the public—which in turn

²⁹ Ibid., 161.

³⁰ Abrams (1970).

only deepened the crisis of confidence between the administration and its observers.³¹

Strategically, Nixon's lonely and paranoid style undercut any hope for preserving South Vietnam, injured US credibility abroad, and diminished the stature of the presidency at home. As the Watergate scandal unraveled in 1973 and 1974, Congress cut off aid to America's imperiled ally. Lawmakers pushed to end US military operations in Southeast Asia and passed the War Powers Act, asserting their constitutional authority over decisions to send Americans into combat.³² Public confidence in political institutions dropped after Nixon's resignation, and future presidents had to contend with lower public approval ratings that fell faster and bottomed out lower than before.³³

The challenge of public accountability confronting Nixon's single-minded pursuit of extracting the United States from Vietnam is not unique to the American experience or to the democratic experience. France faced similar opposition to its moral authority when exercising its military might in Algeria, as has Israel in its conflicts with Lebanon and the Palestinians.³⁴ During its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, even fascist Italy found it necessary to manage international opinion on its use of chemical weapons by co-opting, obstructing, and intimidating reporters and aid workers to prevent reports of the gassings, then leveling countercharges against the Ethiopians when the news broke.³⁵

In all of these cases, government leaders were free to use military force for a time. The need for officials to justify their strategies did not prevent the

³¹ Hammond (1996), 353-354.

³² Rose (2010), 189.

³³ Pious (2002), 534.

³⁴ Merom (2003), Parts II and III and Postscript.

³⁵ Arreguín-Toft (2005), 133-135.

implementation of those strategies, but that need did affect strategic outcomes in meaningful ways. Although political contention is not always a check on the exercise of power, it is clearly important for leaders to choose good strategies and, more importantly, to be *seen to be choosing good strategies in acceptable ways*. Strategy as a process must account for this requirement.

Kennedy's University of Washington Speech: Elite Agreement

Through Contention. The day after he had secretly committed to the course that would end with Nixon—agreeing to provide “individual administrators and advisers for the Governmental machinery of South Viet-Nam”—President John F. Kennedy challenged his political opponents on the right and left to grow up.³⁶ In his address to students at the University of Washington on 16 November 1961, the ostensible topic was diplomacy with the Soviets, but the domestic perils of his path in Asia were the president's major concern. Confronting “problems which do not lend themselves to easy or quick or permanent solutions,” Kennedy saw the United States in a position of strategic disadvantage. The nation's military might was “least effective in combating the weapons most often used by freedom's foes: subversion, infiltration, guerrilla warfare, and civil disorder.” Under “the scrutiny of a free press and public,” America could not “tell different stories to different audiences, foreign, domestic, friendly, and hostile.”³⁷

Yet different stories were emerging, thanks to political foes of “the long twilight struggle” who—faced with the “burdens and frustrations” of an apparently endless conflict—offered up deceptively easy answers that, for

³⁶ The context of the speech in relation to Kennedy's quoted letter of 15 November 1961 to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem is drawn from Dallek (2003), 454-455.

³⁷ Kennedy (1961).

Kennedy, represented the untenable extremes of complete surrender or total war. Rhetoric reduced public debate to false dichotomies of “hard and soft nations, hard and soft policies, hard and soft men.” The challenge posed by an era that demanded both force and friendliness was “a test of our national maturity to accept the fact that negotiations are not a contest spelling victory or defeat.”³⁸

Kennedy then went on to temper expectations for dialogue with the Soviets in a passage that also could describe his chances for constructively engaging his political foes:

They may succeed; they may fail. They are likely to be successful only if both sides reach an agreement which both regard as preferable to the status quo—an agreement in which each side can consider its own situation can be improved. And this is most difficult to obtain.³⁹

No president conducted foreign policy exclusively through the kind of domestic or international consensus-building Kennedy advocated in this speech, including Kennedy. Indeed, the address can be read as a bit of demagoguery against his critics worthy of an Ivy League Hearst. By green-lighting the Bay of Pigs invasion seven months earlier and the assistance mission to Vietnam the day before, Kennedy also exhibited Nixon’s proclivity for making secret choices in the privacy of a small, trusted circle of advisers.

The speech therefore presented an ideal, but one that was not contrary to the practice of politics or international relations. Decisions about war and peace *could* surf along waves of popular emotion or power politics, but this was not inevitable or even desirable in many cases—especially when the nation was

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

confronted with wars of choice and change that defied easy or stable solutions. The substance of strategic discussions mattered, but what also mattered was a process that kept opposing parties aligned and moving forward. If strategy ebbed and flowed on a tide of agreement between people with very different concerns and opinions, then it was important to treat the process of making strategy for what it was—not a contest of convictions, but a test of maturity and, ultimately, humility.

Elite Ownership as the Object of Strategy

Strategy viewed as a product attempts to change conditions. The change that strategy should achieve—often called the end state—is considered to be both an input and an output. Policy makers declare a desired end state, which is transfigured through planning and strategic interactions to emerge as an actual end state which may or may not resemble the initial desires. Thus two twentieth-century military scholars define strategy in similar ways, as an established objective against which results may be assessed:

... the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy.⁴⁰

A plan of action designed in order to achieve some end; a purpose together with a system of measures for its accomplishment.⁴¹

These definitions are accurate to the extent that the policy process routinely provides rational or moral objectives for war: preventing violence against

⁴⁰ Liddell Hart (1967), 321.

⁴¹ Wylie (reprinted 1989), 14.

innocent people, protecting sovereign territory or vital economic interests, expanding political freedom, and so on. However, as the history of America's recent wars suggest, objectives change over time. More alarmingly for the input-output model of strategy, the desired outcomes may be so complex, vaguely understood, or distant that strategy may be pursuing different objectives at the same time for different groups of people.

Proponents of the input-output model demand clear objectives at the outset of any military engagement. In March 2011, President Barack Obama announced that the United States would support NATO's enforcement of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 by conducting air strikes against forces loyal to Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, who had launched a brutal campaign of repression against armed rebels.⁴² The next day, Robert Danin from the Council on Foreign Relations insisted the end state in Libya must be clearer:

... it is imperative that the president refine the nation's objectives more clearly and the means that will be employed to achieve them. Failure to clarify them entails running afoul of our coalition partners, a slide into an open-ended military engagement, or an unintended expansion of the mission. Such an expansion may be justified and necessary, especially if removing Qaddafi remains a U.S. goal. But this should be a decision identified now and taken soberly, not one that the United States is backed into.

The choice of any president to introduce U.S. forces into combat is always difficult. But a more challenging decision awaits: identifying when the mission has achieved its objectives. The more the president identifies and clarifies those objectives, the better are the chances of success and of reduced American casualties in Libya.⁴³

⁴² Obama, "Remarks by the President on Libya" (2011).

⁴³ Danin (2011).

But the fact that establishing unequivocal mission objectives is a difficult step for policy makers may mean that—however desirable clear objectives are in theory—in practice goal-setting will be deferred or revisited more often than it is accomplished in any coherent fashion.

In a case like Libya—where the capabilities of anti-government forces to overthrow and effectively replace a dictator are initially unclear—leaders may wish to preserve the prospect of regime change while being able to fall back on the more limited goal of opposing the mass murder of rebels, protestors, or innocents. Indeed, by mid-April 2011 that appeared to be the course NATO was following in Libya. “Our duty and our mandate ... is to protect civilians, and we are doing that,” the leaders of the United States, Britain, and France wrote in an editorial on 14 April. “It is not to remove Qaddafi by force. But it is impossible to imagine a future for Libya with Qaddafi in power.”⁴⁴

This complex, volatile, messy, open-ended aspect of strategy—which Dolman defines usefully as “a plan for attaining continuing advantage”—is what later scholars have in mind when they refer to the multidimensionality or paradoxical logic of the concept.⁴⁵ Confronted with the uncertainty inherent in the political process, strategists have two options. They can shrug their shoulders at the indecisiveness of their political masters, taking cold comfort in the argument that the failure of any strategy based on muddy objectives is not their fault. Or they can accept that uncertainty is more the rule than the exception, and approach strategy as an exercise in defining objectives as well as achieving them.

⁴⁴ Obama, Cameron, and Sarkozy (2011).

⁴⁵ Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principle in the Space and Information Age* (2005), 6. For the multidimensional nature of strategy, see Gray (1999), 16-47; for the paradoxical logic of strategy, see Luttwak (2001), 1-15.

While strategy as product is about changing conditions, therefore, strategy as process is about changing minds. The value of this method is that it allows the strategist when necessary to set aside unanswered questions about definite objectives or probable outcomes and focus instead on how the strategic product is continuously revealed and refined. When strategists struggle with the more elusive aspects of strategy, they can fall back on its constant procedural objective: *expanding elite ownership of the strategy*. As an object of strategy, *ownership* is defined both on a psychological level—emotional and rational acceptance of values and interests compatible with the strategist's own—and on a behavioral level—a moral and material investment in actions that support the strategist's current plan. Implicit in this definition is the idea that the strategist's values, interests, and plans will change over time through interaction among elites. Sometimes such change will be directed, as when policy makers order a change in plan. Sometimes change will be the result of the negotiation or interpretation of ambiguous ends and means.

In either case, alterations in the plan change the degree to which elites with relevant resources support or oppose it. Obviously, there will always be elites with the ability to affect a strategy's proposed outcomes who will be unsupportive, especially within the enemy's camp. Ownership thus does not seek *shared* values and interests but *compatible* ones—where, in some cases, elite positions are achieved mostly by coercion and result in the unwillingness or inability to actively oppose the strategy, rather than any positive contribution. Regardless, the overall aim of the strategy process is to work through inevitable change and the ensuing contention among friendly, neutral, and hostile elites to generate the widest possible ownership of the strategy.

Elites Versus the Enemy or the Masses. Although many may find the argument intuitive, the idea that strategy should seek elite ownership requires some further unpacking because it runs contrary to conventional wisdom on the dynamics of strategy, the nature of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, and the purpose of government communication or propaganda. With respect to popular conceptions of strategy, elite ownership obviously places a stronger emphasis than usual on interaction among friendly and neutral agents—domestic and international—rather than on acting and reacting against an enemy force. Emphasizing unity of purpose in this way restores an important balance to strategy by recognizing the fact that—while the enemy always gets a vote on a strategy’s progress—the voting population is typically greater than two.

Many contemporary COIN advocates also reject the proposition that strategy should be focused only on harming the enemy.⁴⁶ At the same time, elite ownership of strategy should not be confused with a COIN campaign that attempts to win the hearts and minds of the masses. Strategy as a process assumes that the tipping point for insurgent success is not the positive objective of earning popular support as in a classic Maoist people’s war. Instead, most insurgents pursue the negative objective of marginalizing and weakening counterinsurgents to the point that the counterinsurgents renounce ownership of their efforts.

This is a reasonably sound assumption to make based on the course of modern insurgencies. The purest form of popular revolution—Che Guevara’s concept of a vanguard *foco* of insurgents rallying the peasants around them—

⁴⁶ Springer (2010).

lost credibility during the Cold War after failing in places like Bolivia, where there were political alternatives to armed rebellion and guerillas failed to connect with urban and rural elites who could expand their movement.⁴⁷ As Thomas X. Hammes observes, insurgents since then have shifted their tactics in favor of influencing elites, with the negative goal of directly defeating “the will of enemy leadership, to convince them their war aims are either unachievable or too costly.”⁴⁸ Insurgent agendas seldom inspire a popular majority, and mass support for an insurgency often represents a rejection of the status quo or the human suffering caused by continued fighting. Even among the revolution’s true believers, rebellion short of anarchy represents the transfer of obedience from one elite-run state to another.⁴⁹

Similarly, the view that governments communicate about military operations in order to rally their people around the flag ignores the fact that such communication is not exclusively or even primarily an outward-directed activity. The view that the object of government communication is mass support represents an oversimplification enabled by two schools of thought discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter: normative theories of legitimacy that assume policy consensus flows from the public to the state, and strict empiricists who locate legitimacy in an equal division of legitimacy-granting power among citizens. An alternative view of legitimacy—originating with the sociologist and political economist Max Weber—insists that consensus on state action is as much about the self-justification of rulers as the beliefs of

⁴⁷ Guevara (1997), 318-19.

⁴⁸ Hammes (2006), 208.

⁴⁹ Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (1990), 187.

subjects.⁵⁰ There exists, in the words of Rodney Barker, an “inward turning aspect of legitimation” necessary for strategy—a conversation between those who hold power and what Weber calls the “administrative staff” that authorizes, organizes, and exercises that power.⁵¹

Indeed, among the possible conditions that enable government action, there is no reason to expect that mass public support—compared with elite support or a ruler’s self-confidence to act—is the most important prerequisite or even a necessary one in all cases. As Adam Berinsky observes, it makes sense that political elites—“those actors with the most at stake in a given controversy”—would be engaged in the kinds of cost-benefit calculations around which any ostensibly informed and rational public opinion about policy issues would coalesce.⁵² In many scholarly accounts of US public opinion, elites are portrayed as pursuing their own policy preferences—often structured along similar ideological lines as the general public, but significantly different in their specific application—within a carefully cultivated awareness of what the public will tolerate.⁵³ According to John Zaller, a leading expert on politics and public opinion:

A fully adequate account of elite opinion leadership is not one which sees a public that responds to elite cues in a completely mechanical fashion, though a supportive response of the public to skillfully crafted elite initiatives can usually be counted upon. Rather, it is an account in which elites—always having some ideas of their own, always looking back to see whether the public is following, and always trying to anticipate what the public will say,

⁵⁰ Ibid., 59. Also Weber (trans. 1978), 35-38 and 212-215.

⁵¹ Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: The Self-Presentations of Rulers and Subjects* (2001), 5. Weber (trans. 1978), 212-213.

⁵² Berinsky (2007), 994.

⁵³ See, for example, Holsti (2006), 77, and Stimson (1999), 9-12.

after the dust has settled, that it wanted all along—attempt to lead and to follow at the same time.⁵⁴

The academic consensus on elites also tends to be the consensus of elites about themselves: recent research has found that policymakers rate public opinion as less of an influence on their decisions than the views of issue experts or business and labor leaders.⁵⁵

For strategy to work, presidents and cabinet ministers must be the first to feel that they have the right to use force and the wisdom to apply it judiciously. Armed forces must believe they can and should act as agents of violence on the battlefield. Diplomats must be confident they can move coercion toward conciliation. Leaders at all levels must buy into a common plan. As important as public reactions are to the principal agents of strategy, those reactions serve mainly to reinforce confidence or doubt when that agent looks in the mirror and contemplates the prospect of continued power or the verdict of history. General public support for strategy is important, but it is only one factor in an equation that requires more discussion, reflection, and agreement among governors than among the governed. “When subjects lose faith in rulers,” Barker concludes, “government becomes difficult. When rulers lose confidence in themselves, it becomes impossible.”⁵⁶

Elite Authority in Strategic Decisions. Where public attitudes figure most strongly in the elite ownership of strategy is the question of which elites possess the authority to affect strategy. *Authority*, as defined by the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is a claim for legitimacy based on the

⁵⁴ Zaller (1994).

⁵⁵ Jacobs and Page (2005).

⁵⁶ Barker, *Legitimizing Identities* (2001), 68.

relationship of the speaker “to something in the subjective world to which he has privileged access.”⁵⁷ According to Weber, authority may be claimed and granted on traditional, charismatic, or rational grounds.

With respect to democratic nations and the liberal international system, rational or legal authority—defined by Weber as “resting on a belief in enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority to issue commands”—is the form of elite authority most commonly invoked and acknowledged.⁵⁸ In the fall of 1967, for example, Secretary of State Dean Rusk dismissed university professors critical of the war in Vietnam with the observation that “the fact that a man knows everything there is to know about enzymes doesn’t mean that he knows very much about Vietnam or how to organize a peace or the life and death of nations.”⁵⁹ Under a system of professionalism and secrecy that distinguishes national security as a separate realm of political and technical expertise, the “right to be heard does not automatically include the right to be taken seriously,” as Vice President Hubert Humphrey put it in 1965.⁶⁰ Yet the modern expansion of bureaucracies and the various political, business, academic, and media interests that have collected around them means that the number of people who can be taken seriously on strategic issues is already large and continues to grow.

At a minimum, the elites with rational-legal authority relevant to most modern war strategies would number in the thousands. These elites would include officials from the executive and legislative branches of the governments involved in the conflict; the national defense, internal security, foreign affairs,

⁵⁷ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (trans. 1984), 308.

⁵⁸ Weber (trans. 1978), 215.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Kail (1973), 215.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

and intelligence agencies of those governments; and international and non-governmental organizations operating in the theater of war. Within failed or failing states, appointed or elected officials at the subnational level may need to play a more visible role in owning the strategy as well, since national leaders may lack the authority to direct local resources.

With specific reference to US foreign policy and military strategy, it is important to ask whether military elites should serve as a voice in public debate. The still-dominant institutional approach of Samuel Huntington recommends a division of labor between civilian leaders and a distinct military profession. Elected and appointed officials “determine the ends of national policy and ... allocate the resources” to achieve them, and military officers “apply the resources to the achievement of the goal.”⁶¹ In contrast, Morris Janowitz and Charles Moskos see greater convergence of the military and civilian spheres over time as military organizations interact with civilians, leading to military values and structures that resemble those of civilians.⁶² More recently, Peter D. Feaver attempts to reconcile observations of a distinct military culture with evidence of growing civil-military interaction through a framework in which both sides test the limits of the military’s propensity to work on behalf of civilian goals versus its desire to shirk those objectives in favor of its own.⁶³

Perhaps the most definitive statement that can be made on the proper boundaries for civilian and military officials is that, like strategy, it remains a matter requiring critical reflection and negotiation in uncertain circumstances.

⁶¹ Huntington (1957), 262.

⁶² Janowitz (1960). Moskos (1977).

⁶³ Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (2003).

Rebecca L. Schiff argues that the military, political elites, and citizens must reach concordance on the process of policymaking and basic issues of military leadership, recruiting, and operating style to forestall problems in civil-military relations.⁶⁴ In his popular book *Supreme Command*, Eliot A. Cohen describes historical examples of healthy civil-military interaction as “an unequal dialogue”—one in which both sides expressed “their views bluntly, indeed, sometimes offensively, and not once but repeatedly,” while at the same time “the final authority of the civilian leader was unambiguous and unquestioned.”⁶⁵ I will assume, following Cohen, that military participation in critical discourse on strategy and its associated policy is desirable, but that too much or too little military participation or presumptions of authority in the process can create problems for other elites. For example, what reporters described as President George W. Bush’s “public deference” to the views of senior US generals was resurrected in 2006, when some military officials opposed his planned troop surge in Iraq. The president had to recast his position from one of relying on trusted subordinates with decision authority to one of listening to “bright, capable, smart people whose opinion matters to me a lot.”⁶⁶

In addition to the sometimes contentious sorting out of rational authority, strategists need to remember that the other types of authority described by Weber in many cases will expand the list of relevant elites to non-state actors. The Egyptian Islamist Seyyid Qutb condemned modern Muslim societies because “they have relegated the legislative attribute of God to others

⁶⁴ Schiff (2008).

⁶⁵ Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (2002), 209.

⁶⁶ P. Baker, “President Confronts Dissent on Troop Levels” (2006).

and submit to this authority.”⁶⁷ Many Muslims share a respect for the traditional religious or tribal authority of clerics or tribal leaders above legal authority, even if they do not share Qutb’s zeal for violent revolution against the state. Personal charisma also enhances the authority of all types of leaders, from prime ministers to crime bosses—especially in loose insurgent or counterinsurgent networks where more formal, hierarchical organization is unwelcome or impossible to achieve. An April 2010 *Newsweek* article, for instance, noted that the “aggressive and charismatic” Abdul Qayum Zakir “seemed to be running the [Afghan] insurgency as the Taliban’s top military man” less than two years after his release from prison.⁶⁸ The *New York Times* eulogized Vang Pao in January 2001 as a “charismatic Laotian general who commanded a secret army of his mountain people in a long, losing campaign against Communist insurgents, then achieved almost kinglike status as their leader-in-exile in the United States.”⁶⁹

The public status conferred on traditional and charismatic outsiders can complicate their relationships within prevailing legal systems. The Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was branded as a militant when his Mahdi Army clashed with US and Iraqi forces starting in 2004, and he fled to self-imposed exile in Iran in 2007 once insurgents appeared ready to lose ground to the announced US troop surge. Yet Sadr’s marginalization tended to enhance rather than diminish his authority among Iraqis opposed to the US presence, allowing the cleric to return to Iraq in early 2011 as a political powerbroker with

⁶⁷ Qutb (n.d.), 82.

⁶⁸ Moreau (2010).

⁶⁹ Douglas Martin, “Gen. Vang Pao, Laotian Who Aided U.S., Dies at 81” (2011).

supporters inside the government who could not be dismissed or denounced.⁷⁰ Government elites may attempt to exclude traditional or charismatic leaders from the strategy process because of their overt hostility, or because the extra-legal foundations of their authority challenge the government's definition of legitimacy. But such exclusion carries the risk of alienating these outsiders and increasing their popular status relative to the government. Exclusion therefore may be a greater risk than including outsiders in official dialogues.

Public Media as Elites. Regardless of a government's desire to assert its exclusive authority on strategic issues, any modern theory of strategy must account for the practical reality of the widening space for debate within *public media*—a term I will use as shorthand for both traditional print and broadcast news media and Internet-based social media. The effect of public media on policy and governmental authority has been overstated, but it is significant. Although media coverage of a crisis cannot force a policy response, the speed of coverage certainly decreases the time in which governments can consider their options. The diversity and persistence of coverage ensures more opportunities for public dissent, while the strategy process and its effects will unfold under the pressures of increased public scrutiny.⁷¹ Independent of more traditional capabilities to organize and exercise power, texting and tweeting alone cannot empower people to translate dissent into political change; technology may in fact make dissidents more vulnerable to repression. However, social media does favor long-term policy reform by enabling like-minded people to connect with each other across distances to share information and coordinate more

⁷⁰ Sarhan and Davis (2011).

⁷¹ E. Hanson (2008), 104-108.

concrete social action.⁷² All these trends in public media affect the behavior of democratic leaders as well as the growing number of “democrators” who combine authoritarian rule with careful media management to bolster their domestic and international legitimacy.⁷³

As Ben Hunt argues, public media both constrain the state’s strategic options and complicate its efforts at media manipulation. Information technology increases the risk of widespread exposure and disapproval of questionable actions, which shrinks the scope of acceptable strategic choices. The range of options is particularly narrow for democracies, which have greater difficulty with preserving secrecy and greater requirements for public support. The proliferation of public media also cause what Hunt calls marketing and signaling problems for leaders trying to promote their policies. The attention of a population with more media options fragments, so more effort is needed to market arguments for or against specific strategic preferences. At the same time, the clarity with which public media convey those arguments decreases as information signals pass through more media filters over which leaders have less direct or indirect control.⁷⁴

The influence of government elites on public media—though constrained by the limits of secrecy, marketing, and signaling in a diverse and competitive media environment—is most pronounced in the public framing of strategic issues. Robert Entman characterizes public discourse on US foreign policy as a process of “cascading network activation.”⁷⁵ At the top of the cascade sit the president and other administration officials, who are able to frame public

⁷² Shirky (2011).

⁷³ Nichols (2007).

⁷⁴ Hunt (1997), 33-40.

⁷⁵ Entman (2004), 10.

discourse for other elites and the general public by setting agendas, commanding media space for official views, and controlling the flow of information from within government agencies. While public discourse frequently must follow the government's lead, other elites will rise to challenge the administration if they sense ambiguity between the government's policy and the public's habitual interpretations of policy—reflecting the desire of elites to anticipate, lead, and follow public opinion at the same time. Public media can sustain a policy contest with news frames that confer authority to policy opponents and suggest public support for further elite dissent.⁷⁶

Entman's work on media framing has three major implications for strategy as a process. First, the inherent ambiguity of arguments for wars with emerging or changing objectives makes public media a significant arena for elite debates on strategy—an important assumption for the evidentiary basis of this study. Faced with emboldened opponents and media providers who are committed to framing a contested strategy, officials are more likely to devote their own information efforts to articulating unity and support for the government's preferences. Documents and speeches by civilian and military officials may tend to focus on broad areas of strategic agreement, and government leaders will tend to avoid public venues where they might face authoritative opposition to these views. Much of the disagreement and discussion necessary to expand ownership of contending visions of strategy therefore will take place within media. Official statements will prompt media reactions by elite opponents attempting to influence strategy from without or anonymous government officials attempting to influence strategy from within.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 148-149.

These critiques will in turn prompt reactions by government officials, and so on, with each iteration potentially producing a modification of views.

A second implication of framing is that it elevates the authority of public media producers within the strategy debate. In this respect, traditional news media favored by national and international elites are the most important to strategy. Among US media, this group would include the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*; television news; leading magazines and general-interest policy journals, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Foreign Affairs*; National Public Radio and top syndicated radio talk shows; and leading political news sources such as *Politico*. These mass media represent what W.L. Bennett refers to as the conventional layer of public media, which generally informs policy discussions within the middle layer of prominent blogs and networked advocacy groups as well as the micro layer of personal blogs and individual messaging.⁷⁷

Within public media's middle and micro layers, academic experts, retired policy professionals, or bloggers with high media profiles or specialized knowledge of strategic issues also can claim limited authority over the direction of strategy. These experts sometimes advise elites and frequently inform mass media's framing of contested issues. For example, President Bush distanced himself from the Iraq Study Group's recommendations on troop reductions after consulting with three retired generals and two academics who disagreed with the recommendations, and leaks on the arguments made during the meeting

⁷⁷ Bennett presentation cited in Scott (2005), 10. For traditional journalism's influence on social media content, see Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010).

helped to frame the emerging direction of the administration's Iraq strategy.⁷⁸ The US Department of Defense has had an ongoing struggle with military blogs, which are credible sources of information for troops, military families, and defense journalists, while at the same time providing embarrassing contradictions to official narratives or posing risks to secrecy.⁷⁹

Finally and most importantly, framing collapses the notion that closed discussions, official secrets, or public deception can divide strategy discussions into controllable public and private spheres. For a strategy's advocates or its opponents to succeed in steering an ambiguous strategy in one direction or another, elites close to strategic deliberations must publicly frame their positions in ways that allow support to consolidate among a wider number of elites and sectors of the general public from which elites draw their authority. Moreover, the public nature of these frames improves the standard of truthfulness for public strategy discussions. Although public deception happens, it is risky, as Nixon proved. Opponents can use proof of past deceptions to challenge the deceiver's future claims on authority.

Elites therefore regularly manipulate verifiable facts in public presentations to support their arguments, but statements that fundamentally misrepresent a strategy's proposed ends, means, and effects are rare. As Hunt observes regarding war advocacy:

truthful statements concerning policy intentions are not simply instrumental attempts to make some future lie to the domestic audience possible. On the contrary, in order to prepare the public for future actions, governments need to relate intentions truthfully

⁷⁸ Fletcher and Ricks (2006).

⁷⁹ Shachtman (2007).

as well as make the argument for these intentions as compelling as possible.⁸⁰

Because strategy depends on the interaction of elites both outside and within public media, Barker argues that governments have little reason to resort to public propaganda—understood here as the deliberate manipulation of information to promote mass loyalty to a political cause, rather than the simple communication of facts and opinions that support government positions. Mass loyalty to elites aligned on one or another side of strategic choices is largely habitual, meaning that mass influence is seldom required and therefore seldom attempted.⁸¹

The Value of Asking “Who Cares?” This brief consideration of elite ownership should be sufficient to identify its major implications for the strategy process. Some elites will gravitate naturally towards ownership because the strategy’s proposed purpose and methods align with their values and interests. Others will need to be persuaded to own the strategy through prolonged discussions or negotiations resulting in a revised strategy. Regardless of how elites come to own the strategy, their support is essential for mobilizing the people and resources necessary for success, especially when the strategy is characterized—as many of America’s recent wars have been—by a limited investment of national resources coupled with high expectations for social change.

Determining who is a relevant elite can be difficult, since authority rests on the subjective assessment of rational, traditional, or charismatic criteria, in addition to more objective factors that define an actor’s effectiveness. Opening

⁸⁰ Hunt (1997), 17.

⁸¹ Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (1990), 148.

the strategy process to elites with uncertain authority—an approach considered in more detail in the next chapter and the case study that follows—has the potential to keep them invested in an evolving plan that remains open to their influence. Eventually, of course, strategists will need to determine which elites are most important to the strategy’s success and provide those elites with positive proof of their influence, usually by aligning expectations, actions, and outcomes with their key concerns.

Elite ownership may seem to be a theoretical license to waffle, allowing leaders to avoid tough decisions and adopt a middle course that winds up pleasing no one in its effort to please everyone. This is not the case. As long as officials retain the authority and means to make and implement strategy, the final decision of how far to bend strategy without breaking it always rests with them. A strategy’s authors should remember, however, that while it is difficult to be effective, it is almost impossible to be right. Strategy stops being strategic when it is sacrificed on the altar of principle.

Strategy viewed as a product often asks questions that even the most intelligent government elites cannot answer on their own. Consider, for example, the many factors that must be measured and evaluated to answer the most fundamental questions about a counterinsurgency war, such as “Is there enough security, and will it endure?” or “Is there effective governance by a legitimate government?” In contrast, the central question for strategy as a process creating elite ownership—“Who is in charge, and do they care if the strategy succeeds or fails?”—is much easier to answer.

The potential criteria for assessing elite status and support for strategy are fairly unambiguous. Individual authority often can be determined by a

person's position in government hierarchies, military chains of command, or other structures based on social status, rank, or patterns of deferential behavior. Elite opinion can be considered in the aggregate, with a limited number of factors defining the fault lines on strategic issues—as shown by scholarship categorizing US elites in terms of their attitudes toward militant and cooperative internationalism.⁸² While public expressions of support for strategy may lack sincerity, observable behaviors that distinguish actual ownership from opposition or apathy are clearer.

In addition to its analytic value, asking *who cares* also serves as an essential reminder of the limits of power. There are many things within the strategist's control, but many more things that are not. If that were not true of the wars America now fights, the nation's current strategies would not hinge on the legitimacy of weak client states, the actions of dubious allies, or the fickle moods of angry foreign populations. While expanding elite ownership of strategy may not be entirely sufficient for success, it is the next best thing: a necessary and definable approach to identifying and mobilizing the support required for results that are otherwise beyond the strategist's reach. The next chapter examines in more detail how strategists might do that.

⁸² Wittkopf (1990).

CHAPTER 2

PROLONGED INDECISION, NOT VICTORY: STRATEGY AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Somebody must listen ... and I like to do all the talking myself. It saves time, and prevents arguments.

— Oscar Wilde
“The Remarkable Rocket,” 1888¹

Making sense of disagreements between elites over what is possible and what is right in war—as difficult as that is—becomes more complex in conflicts such as those the United States undertook in Iraq and Afghanistan, which introduce additional contradictions. The indispensable Carl von Clausewitz captured the essence of this dynamic:

...the less intense the motives [for war], the less will the military element's natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives. As a result, war will be driven further from its natural course, the political object will be more and more at variance with the aim of ideal war, and the conflict will seem increasingly *political* in character.²

In the traditional conception of limited war derived from Clausewitz, policy restricts the use of force through various methods—rules of engagement, target lists, caps on troop numbers, etc.—designed to ensure that limited ends are

¹ Wilde (1888).

² Clausewitz (trans. 1976), 88.

pursued with limited means. But the political nature of this kind of war cuts both ways. When leaders have force in reserve, they can calculate that an escalation is necessary to assert values that are only indirectly related to the war's rational objective, bowing to what Clausewitz called the natural course or tendency of war toward uncontrolled violence.³

Take for example the issue of American commitment during the Vietnam War. On 27 February 1968, faced with widespread public concern about the meaning of the Tet offensive, President Lyndon B. Johnson told an audience in Dallas that “our unshakeable and untiring resolve” was the key to lasting peace:

There must be no betrayal of those who stand beside us. There must be no breaking of our trusted commitments. When we give our word we must mean what it says. America's word is America's bond.⁴

President Richard M. Nixon echoed the need for resolve in a national address on the prospects of peace negotiations in May 1969:

A great nation must be worthy of trust. When it comes to maintaining peace, “prestige” is not an empty word. I am not speaking of false pride or bravado—they should have no place in our policies. I speak rather of the respect that one nation has for another's integrity in defending its principles and meeting its obligations.⁵

These statements reflect thinking that runs in directions other than the efficient application of military means to limited political ends.

³ For a thorough discussion of this dynamic in US strategy from Korea to the early 1990's, see Gacek (1994).

⁴ Reed (1968).

⁵ Nixon (1969).

For Johnson and Nixon at these respective points in their presidencies, the mere fact of US military involvement in Vietnam created an absolute expectation for an effective political result. The nation must show that it could do what it said it could do, in order to ensure the continued relevance of its power and authority in relation to other nations. In this case, the prior fact of a military commitment pushed leaders to expand the use of violence as they pursued a vision of national effectiveness that had become vested in the Vietnam policy. Critics of US involvement, on the other hand, argued that national effectiveness could not be defined so narrowly. The effects of continued violence and the erosion of American moral leadership demanded a more appropriate prioritization of national resources toward other endeavors. Thus Senator J. William Fulbright argued that “many of America’s allies are more inclined to worry about an undue preoccupation with Vietnam than to fear the consequences of American withdrawal.”⁶

Strategy as Critical Discourse: A Theoretical Model

Foundations in Theory for Strategy as Critical Discourse. The strategist works in a world where the views of both a hawkish president and a dovish senator—plus countless others—matter. In defining this work, Clausewitz argued that the “first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” This judgment

⁶ Quoted in Kail (1973), 207.

was grounded in an appreciation of the “paradoxical trinity” of war’s dominant tendencies: a will toward “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity” usually residing within the people; an element of war’s rational “subordination, as an instrument of policy” to the government; and “the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit” of the commander and his army “is free to roam.” The challenge for the strategist was to recognize—and possibly maintain—“a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”⁷ Beyond the magnet metaphor, Clausewitz does not address exactly how statesmen and commanders achieve this balance. But by defining war as an extension of politics, associating the trinity with social groups, and assigning commanders a role in reconciling violence and reason, it is reasonably clear that, for Clausewitz, the first and most comprehensive strategic question is a matter of social interaction and critical or intuitive interpretation.

Thomas Risse succinctly characterizes the means by which interaction and interpretation proceed in politics with his description of the three logics of social action.⁸ These three categories extend the distinction between rational choice and social constructivist theories, introduced by James March and Johan Olsen, by adding the theory of communicative action developed by Jürgen Habermas.⁹ The logic of consequence—associated with rational choice theory—argues that the identities and interests of actors are “mostly fixed during the process of interaction,” and action thus derives from applying reason

⁷ Clausewitz (trans. 1976), 88-89.

⁸ Risse (2000).

⁹ March and Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (1989). March and Olsen, “The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders” (1998). Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (trans. 1984).

to the world as it is in order “to maximize or optimize one’s own interests and preferences.”¹⁰ The logic of appropriateness—associated with constructivism—sees actions motivated more by ideas than facts, specifically the cultural norms that regulate behavior and define social roles. Risse contends that there is a third mode of political interaction implicit in the logic of appropriateness, the logic of arguing, which predominates in situations where actors are not sure which interests or standards apply.¹¹

All three logics of action shape the way elites communicate with each other about issues, including strategy. Although all elites have interests, the logic of consequence emerges most clearly when actors are sure of their roles and preferences and therefore use rhetoric to impress the rationality of their views on others. Yet even in these cases, ideas about appropriateness define acceptable sources of authority and standards of truth—considerations that quickly become paramount when facts are in dispute. The logic of arguing holds sway when the other approaches prove insufficient because fundamental assumptions about what is preferable, evident, or right are challenged by circumstances or the claims of other actors. Such challenges are frequent in public media, where there is a greater diversity of views, where actors have difficulty justifying behavior strictly in terms of self-interest, and where basic disagreements about social identity—such as the relative authority of citizens or the state—are more likely.¹²

By describing the public interplay of the logics of action in this fashion, Risse is echoing a particular view of the public sphere, described by Habermas

¹⁰ Risse (2000), 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 6-7 and 11-14.

¹² Ibid., 22-23.

as the scene of struggle between two “politically relevant areas of communication” that have tended to suppress or co-opt communication. The first was “the system of informal, personal, nonpublic opinions” in which the reasons behind actions or conditions are taken for granted as a result of social attitudes or individual biases shared by broad segments of the population. In contrast, the competing system “of formal, institutionally authorized opinions” defines the views and interests of a small number of powerful elites. Although informal opinion could be manipulated by propaganda or public shows designed to advance the formal agenda of the authorities, Habermas posits a third position of “critical publicity” involving “the participation of private people” informed by critical debate “in a process of formal communication conducted through intraorganizational public spheres.”¹³

These three theoretically dense descriptions of war, social action, and the public sphere can be combined into a reasonably simple but useful model of strategy as an act in which participants negotiate between the consequences of what various individuals or groups want them to do in an instrumental sense and the appropriateness of what others will allow them to do in a normative sense (Figure 1). In the wars of choice and change discussed in the last chapter, strategy seeks an appropriate course of action producing predictable consequences in circumstances where elite ideas about what is appropriate or what consequences matter are shifting sands beneath the strategist’s feet. The mediating position of strategists who must define or redefine ends and means requires an approach to strategy that I will define as *critical discourse*.

¹³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. 1989), 245-248.

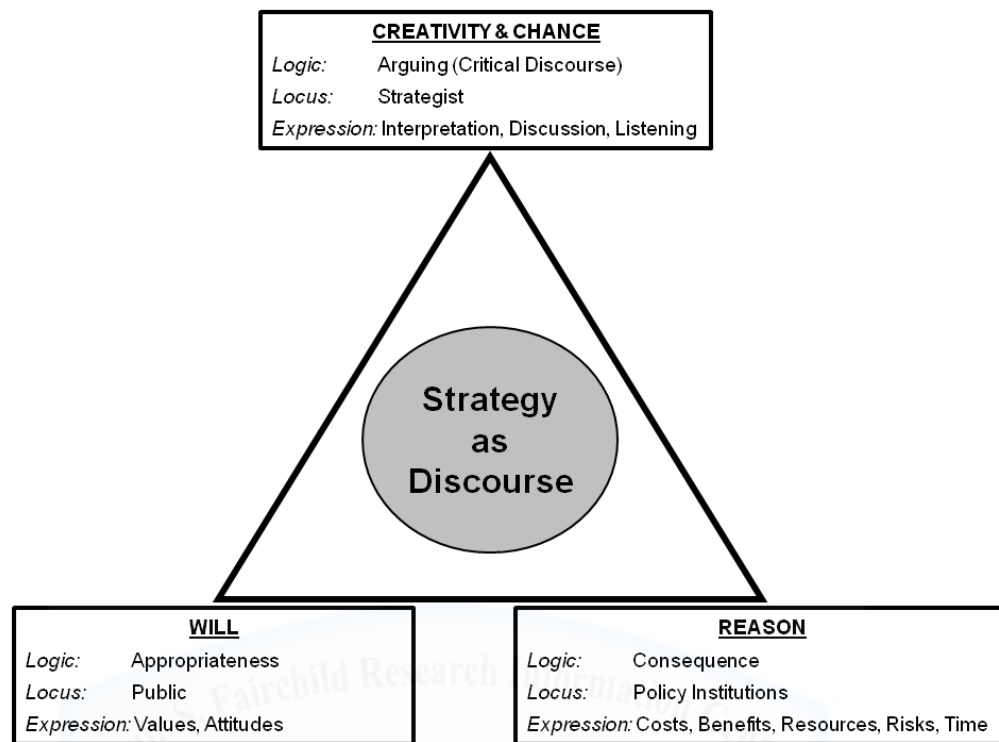


Figure 1. Strategy as discourse.

Characteristics of Critical Discourse. In recent years, the continuity between strategy and discourse has been developed most fully by Paul N. Edwards in his study of Cold War America, *The Closed World*. Edwards defines discourse as “social interactions—material, institutional, and linguistic—through which reality is interpreted and constructed for us and with which human knowledge is produced and reproduced.”¹⁴ A discourse in Edwards’s formulation combines

techniques and technologies, metaphors, language, practices, and fragments of other discourses around a support or supports. It produces both power and knowledge: individual and institutional behavior, facts, logic, and the authority that reinforces it. It does

¹⁴ Edwards (1996), 34.

this in part by continually maintaining and elaborating “supports,” what amounts to a discursive infrastructure. It also continually expands its own scope, occupying and integrating conceptual space in a kind of discursive imperialism. Like a paradigm, much of the knowledge generated by a discourse comes to form “common sense.”¹⁵

This is an expansive definition of discourse, which corresponds to Edwards’s project of tracing the pervasive effects of military technology and related conceptions of man and machine on American culture. Discourse can grow to become what Edwards envisions it to be, but discourse also can occupy a critical rather than a dominant cultural position. Where Edwards looks backwards on how Cold War strategy defined an era, strategy as discourse must move forward at times of relative uncertainty or discomfort with respect to existing strategic ideas.

The theoretical model used in this study shares with Edwards a definition of discourse as social interaction in various face-to-face and technological forms that is intended to produce and reproduce knowledge. Discourse draws from the language and practices of dominant modes of expression with specific social groups, such as the jargon tossed around by foreign policy or military wonks. However, *critical* discourse as either a category or a specific instance of communication is distinguished from these dominant forms of discourse in three important ways.

First, critical discourse is necessary in circumstances where there is comparatively weak agreement on the course prescribed by widely shared interests or values—that is, when the language, practices, and ideas of a dominant discourse appear inadequate. Participants in critical discourse often

¹⁵ Edwards (1996), 40. For the classic description of the related concept of paradigm, see Kuhn (1962).

face questions about their true interests or opposing definitions of right and wrong, sometimes creating a need for actors to affirm or defend the importance of their roles and the rightness of their actions. On the other hand, situations in which such basic assumptions can go unchallenged for extended periods eliminates the need for critical discourse and thus for active strategizing. Under such conditions, the existing strategy and the dominant discourse informing it stay in place, perhaps modified slightly in practice but essentially untouched, regardless of efforts to simulate strategic thinking through uncritical revisions of military plans and the like.

A second defining feature of critical discourse is its reliance on the logic of arguing and the norms of communicative action—validity and equity—defined below. Participants are willing to listen as well as talk. They are aware or at least establish conditions in which they may become aware of how their views and actions are shaped by interests, identities, and social norms. By acknowledging their potential biases or intellectual limitations, actors in a critical discourse advance the possibility of changing their behavior or outlook in the light of more persuasive arguments.

Third, actors in a critical discourse move among social groups that are arguing over established interests, identities, and norms. This movement can be physical—as in the case of state visits or summits—or verbal—as with press statements designed to signal greater openness to a previously rejected view. As these examples indicate, this movement is usually public in the sense of being known to a large number of interested observers. Even in cases where interaction is designed to be private—for instance, closed-door meetings or confidential correspondence—the results often become a matter of public record

because one or more participants has an interest in signaling developments to outside groups. Public movement between contending groups can help improve consensus between those parties, but it also creates problems for the person doing the moving by raising questions about discretion, loyalty, or consistency.

Although critical discourse is a process that negotiates between opposing alternatives, it is not inherently subversive or transformative. Critical discourse certainly retains the *potential* to undermine or overturn an established order. However, as Margaret S. Archer has observed, critical discourse can effectively contain dissent by allowing elites to air different opinions that are eventually rejected as marginal or impractical.¹⁶ Even critical discourse that actively tries to change the status quo does *not* lead inevitably in a discernibly new direction, much less a better direction. The business of changing strategy remains, as Clausewitz cautioned, a matter of chance and probability in which multiple outcomes are possible, including the persistence of old patterns of strategic thought and operation.

In most cases, though, it can be assumed that under the conditions in which critical discourse typically takes place—the insufficiency of the status quo, leading to competition among two or more opposing ideas—most actors will prefer real or perceived change rather than stasis. The prevailing strategy will not be able to satisfy this preference without modifying its language and concepts, if not its basic ideas. To succeed, critical discourse must resolve contradictions between dominant and dissenting discourses, or the possibility of resolution has to be preserved in readily apparent commitments to an ongoing discussion.

¹⁶ Archer (1996), Chapter 7.

Readers familiar with Jeffrey W. Legro's *Rethinking the World* will recognize similarities between the idea of strategy as critical discourse and his examination of the influence of collective ideas on how great powers conceive their place in the international order. Legro argues that replacing old foreign policy ideas with new ones depends on a two-step process of collapse and consolidation. Foreign policy failures resulting from adherence to prevailing ideas favor a change in those ideas, whereas other circumstances—successes or failures consistent with the dominant principles—favor continuity. Collapse alone cannot explain changes in the basic ideas informing a nation's foreign policy, however, since there must be an acceptable alternative to justify any wholesale rejection of the existing policy paradigm. This process of consolidation requires the presence of one prominent alternative as opposed to none or many, in addition to early successes attributable to the alternative approach. Fundamental change in foreign policy is thus relatively difficult to achieve—a simple change of political administration or external shock to the system is not sufficient.¹⁷

Critical discourse clearly is part of the process of change and continuity that Legro describes. Critical discourse can identify problems with existing ideas and build consensus around prominent alternatives. It can promote a significant change in state policy or, failing to do so, reinforce the collective wisdom of retaining old ideas and associated practices. The difference between Legro's contribution and my own lies mainly in the level of analysis. Legro is interested in grand strategy, "national ideas about how to approach

¹⁷ Legro (2005), 28-39.

international society.”¹⁸ From this vantage point, he favors continuity in the state’s dominant system of ideas, viewing change strictly in terms of a one-for-one swap between a collapsed dominant system and a prominent alternative one. But, as Legro admits, there is considerable space for debate on the meaning and application of ideas underneath the umbrella of grand strategy:

Dominant ideas are almost never monolithic entities, reproduced and accepted in the mind of each and every citizen. While they may serve as the touchstone for the collectivity, and have the status of “tradition,” they are also often questioned and politically contested by at least some individuals and subgroups. In most countries, most of the time, there is rarely just one opinion of what policy is appropriate; there are always defenders and critics of any single position.¹⁹

Given this continuous back-and-forth over foreign policy’s implementation, Legro concludes that his study of “rapid discontinuous ideational transformation” leaves unanswered questions about lesser included alterations in the “general logic of a dominant idea,” where change can occur through a “layering-on” of ideas in which “triumphs of the new” do not represent “the complete dismissal of the old.”²⁰

This twilight world between dominant and dissenting ideas is an important area for study, because many military strategies function below the level of radical transformations in policy. Given the durability of the big ideas informing all aspects of a state’s foreign affairs, it is reasonable to assume that most strategies will not seriously challenge orthodoxy, but instead will test how general ideas are interpreted in specific cases. Although grand strategy may decisively shape a state’s view of the world, it does very little to translate that

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., 6.

²⁰ Ibid., 181.

vision into reality. In practice, military strategy requires an alignment of means to ends in situations where the imperatives of grand strategy may be unclear. This is one implication of Clausewitz's definition of strategy—"the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war"—in which both the nature of appropriate engagements and the purposes they serve are left out of the definition as matters for discussion and judgment in the here and now.²¹ The idea of strategy as critical discourse is less concerned with the progression of dominant ideas than with understanding how strategists define those ideas within a specific context, or how they muddle through when the apparent collapse of one mode of strategic thinking has not been followed by the consolidation of another one.

Objections to Practicing Strategy as Critical Discourse

At this point, it is important to reiterate the modest practical objective of the model proposed so far. Unlike Edwards or Legro, this chapter and the extended case study that follows does not attempt to define an era in history by its discourse or to explain major historical events across different eras through a comprehensive theory of continuity and change. The purpose of the theory is simply to provide one way to understand how the US strategy in Afghanistan was developed and interpreted by Washington policy makers, operational commanders, people in the field, and media observers at each of these levels. However, since the critical discourse model is related to generalized ideas of strategy, action, or communication that have been advanced by others, it is

²¹ Clausewitz (trans. 1976), 177.

necessary to address some of the theoretical objections that would rule out critical discourse as a model for strategy in multiple cases, including Afghanistan. These objections cover familiar ground in the agent-structure debate across generations of political and social science, so each potential objection must be raised and answered only briefly. The chapters that follow contain a more extended if necessarily incomplete consideration of critical discourse as method of interpreting US strategy in Afghanistan as compared to alternative explanations.

Strategy is Action, Not Talk. An intuitive reaction to the definition of strategy as critical discourse—particularly from those engaged in the day-to-day business of military operations—would be some version of the maxim that talk is cheap. It should be reasonably clear that, like Clausewitz’s theory, the critical discourse model makes a distinction between things that must happen in the real world—tactics or, more broadly, engagements—and strategy as an intellectual bridge linking real conditions and events to a purpose and a plan of action that by their nature can exist only as ideas. It is clear that strategy requires action or at least a decision to refrain from action. This imperative directly impacts the substance and process of critical discourse.

It should be equally clear, however, that past, present, and future actions achieve meaning only through a framework of ideas, and that various actors will add their own, often contrary, perspectives when interpreting or representing those facts. The insurgents fighting US forces in the Philippines, according to Colonel Frederick Funston of the 20th Kansas Infantry, were “an illiterate, semi-savage people, who are waging war, not against tyranny, but against Anglo-Saxon order and decency”—a view that, setting aside its racist

language for a moment, more or less accurately reflected the daily frustrations of a man charged with enforcing order against violent opposition from within an impoverished population. Lower in the ranks, young American enlistees were just as apt to grant their enemy a grudging respect: “damn fools who won’t stay whipped,” in one Texas infantryman’s words.²² Sitting atop the US administration of the Philippines, William H. Taft, appointed by President William McKinley to coordinate civilian pacification efforts, saw American soldiers and civilians as part of the problem—a “not only vicious but stupid” lot whose words and deeds with respect to average Filipinos undercut Taft’s efforts to woo Manila’s upper class.²³ As these brief examples show, a due reverence for the facts provided by otherwise reliable sources requires the recognition that the perspectives through which those facts are filtered vary widely. Without a process that makes sense of different perceptions of actions and outcomes, it is difficult to reach anything approaching truth.

Talking Cannot Change the World, Only Reflect It. A more conceptual series of objections to a general model of strategy as critical discourse revolve around the argument that actors cannot be free, detached participants in discussions about their interests, values, or identities. Discourse from this vantage point represents nothing more than rhetorical window-dressing on choices dictated by other conditions. From a neorealist perspective—to take the first prominent, contemporary structural approach to international relations—discourse would serve only to articulate and reproduce patterns of success in preserving or expanding the state’s material capabilities

²² Quoted in Brewer (2009), 33-34.

²³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 40.

and realizing its sovereign interests.²⁴ Neorealism's limitations with respect to the process of idea formation have been effectively laid out by David Dessler, Alexander Wendt, and others, and do not need to be repeated in great detail here.²⁵ It is sufficient to point out that neorealism's basic assumptions about state behavior—the ordering principle of anarchy, the formal equality of states, the presumption of rationality in the logic of self-help and the definition of interests—all presume that there is common agreement among states on the circumstances and rules that govern their behavior *prior to* their interaction within the international system. Critical discourse assumes that the players and rules of the game cannot always be taken for granted in this fashion.

Although a theory of critical discourse must reject certain neorealist assumptions, it cannot fully embrace the alternative explanations often advanced by constructivism, since the latter tends to replace one determinism—the distribution of material power in an anarchic system—with another—the influence of norms and social organizations. As Risse observes, the common constructivist position focuses on the appropriateness of actions based on shared ideas that define identities and standards of conduct, such as sovereignty or human rights. Much constructivist literature presents these ideas in solid form as cultural constraints on action, simply stated in the form of “good people or states do X in situation Y.”²⁶ In practice, this can lead to a narrow concept of actors as echo chambers for their respective national or

²⁴ The core text for neo- or structural realism is Waltz (1979). Waltz discusses emergent culture as an emulation of successful state practices on pages 74-77 and 127-128.

²⁵ Dessler (1989). Wendt (1992).

²⁶ Risse (2000), 5-6.

institutional cultures, particularly on questions of security.²⁷ This analytical approach is not unique to constructivists *per se* but draws from an extensive body of work that considers military culture and bureaucratic politics as constraints on strategy.²⁸

Such constraints on self-awareness and communication are real, and their persistence in the formulation and implementation of strategy must be respected. However, any theory that assumes the social construction of constraining identities, norms, or forms of organization also accepts the mutability of such constructions. In theory if not always in practice, what is constructed can be deconstructed in a way that allows actors to become aware of these influences, or reconstructed in a way that adapts those influences to a changing social reality. Critical discourse offers a means of deconstructing and reconstructing social constraints, which is not to say that it is always successful either in identifying all operative constraints in a given situation or in finding ways to transcend them.

Meet the New Talk, Same as the Old Talk. The creative potential of discourse itself is the source of a third possible argument against the freedom of actors, popularized by the French school of structuralism. In this view, developed from Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, discourse cannot be critical as long as actors must employ methods of communication and knowledge production that perpetuate existing power relationships.²⁹ The aspects of this approach most relevant to the idea of strategy as critical

²⁷ Representative studies of the effects of dominant ideas associated with an identifiable "national security culture" can be found in Katzenstein, ed. (1996).

²⁸ For influential examples, see Huntington (1957); Weigley (1973); Builder (1989); and Halperin and Clapp (2006).

²⁹ Gramsci (trans. 1992).

discourse are elucidated by Michel Foucault, particularly his objections to Habermas's theory of communicative action and his descriptions of discourse's role in enforcing discipline and repressive governmentality in the modern state.³⁰ With specific reference to US strategy in Afghanistan, the implications of Foucault's work in these areas were made explicit by Jacques Derrida shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Derrida asked whether what the attackers truly threatened was

the *discourse* that comes to be, in a pervasive and overwhelming, hegemonic fashion, *accredited* in the world's public space. What is legitimated by the prevailing system (a combination of public opinion, the media, the rhetoric of politicians and the presumed authority of all those who, through various mechanism, speak or are allowed to speak in the public space) are thus the norms inscribed in every apparently meaningful phrase that can be constructed with the lexicon of violence, aggression, crime, war, and terrorism, with the supposed differences between war and terrorism, national and international terrorism, state and nonstate terrorism, with the respect for sovereignty, national territory, and so on.³¹

In other words, the discourse employed by strategists can be a cage of their own devising, in which the necessary words and modes of expression can only extend continued inequities of power that are a root cause of international conflict.

As opposed to neorealist or constructivist critiques which are concerned with constraints on the agency of those empowered by the state system, Foucault and Derrida draw attention to the constraints on those who are disempowered because of that system. This focus is shared by those who turn from the inherently instrumental nature of strategic language or culture to the

³⁰ Foucault (trans. 1977). Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, eds. (1991), 87-104.

³¹ Quoted in Borradori (2003).

motives of the most prominent participants in critical discourse. Working from twentieth-century theories of mass media manipulation observed in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and consumerist America, contemporary observers often view all public communication by government officials and their media co-conspirators as propaganda intended to deceive a gullible public.³²

Any side in a strategic dispute can claim that what their opponents are saying is propaganda. Thus, from the political left, the conclusion that the “news coverage of the 9/11 attacks brought out a lingering and pervasive preoccupation with fear that has been exploited by government officials seeking to expand social control and limit civil liberties.”³³ Or, from the right, comes the charge that media dares to “disrespect our troops’ sacrifice by claiming the right to print and to say anything without a corresponding responsibility to truth.”³⁴ Or, from both liberals and conservatives opposed to military interventions, the broader historical contention that US officials “in recent decades have turned to more misleading manipulation to preserve their freedom of action” in war.³⁵ Where neorealists or constructivists see government speech as a reflection of severe material or social constraints on action, others see the same language as a pliable instrument of demagogues who want to wage war.

The idea that government officials are willing and able to spread propaganda willy-nilly is a flawed generalization. Modern wars have tended to diminish rather than enhance the power and reputation of American leaders over the long run, which makes selling war a losing proposition for political

³² For a classic mid-twentieth-century treatment of propaganda, see Ellul (trans. 1965).

³³ Altheide (2006), 82.

³⁴ MacNicol (2010).

³⁵ Brewer (2009), 283.

leaders with any historical perspective.³⁶ Critics also benefit from being able to label information as propaganda after the fact, when it has had its ostensibly planned effect. Events that are condemned as exercises in propaganda, such as the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square on 9 April 2003, sometimes lack the deliberate planning or control that this designation implies.³⁷ Failed efforts at persuasion often are ignored or attributed to people's awareness—inexplicably absent when propaganda seems to be working—that they are being manipulated.

Despite these caveats in favor of the good intentions and limited power of government officials and media celebrities, one needs to look no further than their daily abuses of political language to acknowledge that concerns about the misuse of discourse are valid. It is important to remember that the outcome of critical discourse—or what sometimes is merely *represented* as critical discourse—is not automatically good or legitimate. As mentioned above and discussed at length later in this chapter, the standards associated with an effort at critical discourse must address these questions of exclusion, coercion, or manipulation of language and evidence.

Ultimately, though, the empirical claim that discourse has been and therefore can be misappropriated is different from the theoretical claim that discourse is always appropriated in this way or that government agents always act against the interests of the less powerful. Whereas the existence of propaganda must be incorporated into the critical discourse model, assertions about the impossibility of using language in a critical way are refuted by their own logic. Unless such criticism is voiced in a vacuum, the argument that

³⁶ Sherry (1995), 469.

³⁷ Maass (2011).

discourse automatically supports established power structures is a critical stance that cannot be adopted if discourse really works that way. Likewise, the contention that public media are the exclusive domain of powerful people compelled to perpetuate their power ignores the fact that such an appropriation is necessary only when opposing actors have the ability to alter existing power relationships through the same or similar channels. One needs to look no farther than Al Jazeera television's coverage of the 2011 protests that erupted across the Middle East to see that media elites can challenge those in power.³⁸

Strategy Reflects Both Agency and Structure. As Ole Holsti suggested more than thirty years ago, there are times when students of foreign policy might want to look beyond the structural constraints on strategic thought outlined here and consider the cognitive processes that apply to specific situations and specific leaders. Such situations would include those "that require more than merely the application of standard operating procedures and decision rules; for example, decisions to initiate or terminate major international undertakings, including wars, interventions, alliances, aid programs, and the like."³⁹ This study examines critical discourse on the US military presence in Afghanistan in this context, which requires granting some credit to the potential effectiveness of individual agents despite their constraints. Of course, this position comes with concessions to the weaknesses of individual or small-group agency, including the vagaries of human psychology and dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics such as groupthink.⁴⁰ But as with arguments that favor inescapable structural constraints, a

³⁸ Worth and Kirkpatrick (2011).

³⁹ Reprint of the author's 1976 essay "Cognitive Process Approaches to Decision-Making: Foreign Policy Actors Viewed Psychologically" in Holsti (2006), 38-39.

⁴⁰ For the two most prominent examples in the field, see Jervis (1976) and Janis (1982).

preoccupation with cognitive constraints resurrects the question that must be answered to move beyond theory into practice: is there a way for agents to make an honest and perhaps successful attempt to overcome all these limitations in order to make or remake strategy?

For the purpose of what follows, the critical discourse model assumes that there is an alternative—a frustrating, burdensome, and seldom successful alternative, but an alternative nonetheless—to predetermination by social construct or human nature. As Anthony Giddens argues persuasively in his seminal work *The Constitution of Society*, social practice is built on both agency and structure. Structure constrains autonomous behavior but also makes it possible, in the sense that social knowledge “provides for the generalized capacity to respond to and influence an indeterminate range of social circumstances.”⁴¹ By extending the power that Giddens attributes to specifically sociological knowledge, critical discourse can be seen as the source of a *double hermeneutic* in which agents become aware of both their own and others’ interpretations of their actions. This self-awareness carries the potential for agents to adapt their actions to other perspectives that are advanced or anticipated in accordance with what the agents know about the structures and standards of social interaction. Communicating facilitates knowing, and knowing facilitates changes in future action and communication.⁴²

Indeed, Giddens hints in his later work that the twenty-first century could be characterized by social and material pressures to increase critical reflection in political behavior, leading to a potential democratization of democracy that privileges dialogue over submission to the authority conveyed

⁴¹ Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1984), 22.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 284-285.

by violence, wealth, or social standing.⁴³ The US foreign policy process is nowhere near this radically democratized vision of Giddens and assorted boosters of a new information-age politics. But the concept of critical discourse as one path for strategy to follow does not need to make grand claims. It is enough for the model to focus attention where it belongs: the points where inscrutable individual personalities and the enduring features of America's national security culture are both publicly presented and open to influence. The idea of strategy as critical discourse acknowledges the difficulty of making good strategic choices in all cases, while highlighting the possibility of pragmatic action in the form of processes that preserve the greatest potential for strategic success in many cases.

Legitimacy as the Subject of Critical Discourse in America's Wars

The usefulness of conceptualizing strategy as critical discourse in the abstract is made clearer in the specific context of the wars the United States is now fighting—which have become counterinsurgency wars, although they did not begin that way. In general, international relations can be viewed across a spectrum of violence extending from brute force to attraction.⁴⁴ As Thomas Schelling has defined it, brute force “succeeds when it is used” because it eliminates any choice for the actor who is its victim.⁴⁵ By contrast, attraction—conceived by way of Joseph Nye's definition of soft power—is “getting others to

⁴³ See, for example, Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), 80.

⁴⁴ This paragraph is adopted from Byman and Waxman (2002), 3-14, and from Nye (2004), 5-11.

⁴⁵ Schelling (1966), 3.

want the outcomes that you want” without violence or proffered material rewards, sometimes by persuasion and sometimes by means of redefining one’s own interests or expectations.⁴⁶ Most interaction occurs between these two extremes, with states working their will through force, the threat of withheld violence (coercion), economic inducements, arguing, and exemplary behavior. As conflicts come to rely less on brute force and more on attraction, they become—as Clausewitz observed—more *political*, which is to say more concerned with discourse as a means to reinforce attractive behavior and realize ideas.

There is considerable agreement among classical and contemporary theorists and practitioners that counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare is largely a contest of ideas, with the legitimacy of rule as the ultimate object of that contest. Hence T. E. Lawrence viewed the aim of the Arab revolt against the Ottomans as a “negation of central power” designed to restore traditional clan and village rule. The Arabs “were fighting to get rid of Empire, not to win it.”⁴⁷ Reflecting on his experience in Algeria in the late 1950’s, David Galula claimed, “There was no doubt in my mind that support from the population was the key to the whole problem for us as well as for the rebels... In order to pacify, therefore, we had to identify those Moslems who were for us, to rely on them to rally the majority of the population, and together to eliminate the rebels and their militant supporters.”⁴⁸ The more hardnosed Frenchman Roger Trinquier in part refuted Galula’s perspectives on Algeria by concluding that “it is not at all necessary to have the sympathy of the majority of the people in order to rule

⁴⁶ Nye (2004), 5.

⁴⁷ Lawrence (reprinted 1991), 100.

⁴⁸ Galula (reprinted 2006), 69.

them.” But, for Trinquier, the aim of modern warfare was still the “*overthrow of the established authority in a country and its replacement by another regime.*”⁴⁹

Recently, the primacy of ideas and discourse about legitimacy has become even more explicit in influential books about COIN. “It is fundamental to build the political legitimacy and effectiveness—in the eyes of its people and the international community—of a government affected by an insurgency,” David Kilcullen writes in *The Accidental Guerilla*. “Political reform and development is the hard core of any counterinsurgency strategy, and it provides a framework for all other counterinsurgency programs and initiatives.”⁵⁰ Although John A. Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* is more interested in the adaptation of military organizations fighting insurgencies than in the political aspects of COIN, Nagl reinforces the centrality of political legitimacy by contrasting how British forces in Malaya used the Alliance Party to foster “nationalism as an issue for the government against the insurgents” with the failure of US forces to promote similar sentiments in South Vietnam.⁵¹ In *The Sling and the Stone*, Thomas X. Hammes argues that what he calls fourth-generation warfare is facilitated in part by political and economic rivalries to state legitimacy, posed by international or subnational organizations connected to citizens through global information networks.⁵²

Common to all of these classic and contemporary approaches to COIN is an emphasis on employing both attraction and a limited amount of brute force or coercion in order to influence people. The ultimate objective of either side is

⁴⁹ Trinquier (reprinted 2006), 4-5 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁰ Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (2009), 265.

⁵¹ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2002), 90-91.

⁵² Hammes (2006), 32-43.

a coerced or co-opted but ultimately *internalized* recognition of one's legitimacy relative to the opponent. But the importance of government legitimacy, which lies at the heart of the US military's current COIN doctrine, needs to be approached with some skepticism. It is unclear that tactical engagements designed to promote popular feelings of safety, opportunity, or fairness add up to legitimacy *en masse*. As with Lawrence's Arabs, it is often easier to explain what legitimacy seekers are *against* than what they are *for*, and definitions of legitimacy as a positive object of war can become muddy.

For example, the US Army and Marine Corps's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* states that "Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate."⁵³ Therefore, the "primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government."⁵⁴ This objective begs the question of how the attainment of *legitimate government* is different from the implementation of *effective governance* is different from the central issue of attaining *political power*. At issue, too, is whether there can be a shared interpretation of any of these conditions given the differences among "U.S., local and international visions of legitimacy" that the manual concedes can "complicate operations." The means necessary to achieve legitimacy are equally problematic, since the recommended lines of operation and intelligence indicators are couched in relative and self-referential terms, such as failures to select leaders in a "just and fair" manner

⁵³ US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

or to sustain a “culturally acceptable level and rate of political, economic, and social development.”⁵⁵

Establishing legitimacy as the *object* of COIN efforts therefore can put officials in the unenviable position of arguing that they have a legitimate strategy because their strategy is designed to produce legitimacy. It is relatively easy to demolish this strategic house of cards because its ends and means are defined by terms inseparable from malleable value judgments. Members of an ethnic minority have the right to see strategy producing ineffective governance or an illegitimate government if candidates sharing their ethnicity are not elected to parliament, regardless of how the interests of minorities as a whole might be affected by continued instability. Similarly, for advocates of women’s rights, strategy may fail its objective if it requires compromises on legal protections for women, perhaps even if extended conflict proves a more immediate danger to the health and welfare of those women.

Avoiding the traps of moral relativism requires a more precise definition of what legitimacy means in relation to American strategy. Such a definition is complicated by the fact that strategists face different thresholds of legitimacy with different audiences. Broadly considered, within the United States there is an assumption of legitimate governance, and therefore the domestic imperative of strategy is to sustain a belief that actions do not depart from habitual consent to the government’s use of limited force.⁵⁶ But weak foreign governments typically lack this basic level of legitimacy, and insurgents therefore define their own status with reference to the illegitimacy of those

⁵⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁶ For the habitual nature of legitimacy within the state, see Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (1990), 114 and 162.

governments or the occupying powers supporting them.⁵⁷ The international imperative of strategy in COIN warfare thus implies the creation rather than the mere sustainment of legitimacy.

To account for the different levels of legitimacy relevant to either domestic or international contexts, we can define the strategic process as *critical discourse about the legitimacy of state action that derives from the accepted validity of the plans and facts under discussion as well as the equitable involvement of relevant elites in the discursive process*. Although this definition does not escape the enduring problem of subjective assessments of legitimacy, it has comparative virtues. By assessing a strategy's legitimacy in terms of current elite support and involvement, the definition avoids reference to any distant and possibly unattainable objective—something like effective governance by a legitimate government. Instead, strategists are directed toward important interim steps toward aspirational objectives—specifically, creating and sustaining the validity and equity of critical discourse, as described in the next two sections. In this formulation, the attainment of legitimacy is not the *object* of strategy but the *subject* of strategy as critical discourse.

Validity: Appropriateness and Consequence. The first element of strategy as critical discourse about legitimacy is *validity* in the common definition of being “well-founded on fact, or established on sound principles, and thoroughly applicable to the case or circumstances.”⁵⁸ Discursive validity is primarily a function of the logics of social action already discussed, *appropriateness* and *consequence*. Each of these two elements corresponds to the principal components of strategy—ends and means—as well as traditional

⁵⁷ Barker, *Legitimizing Identities* (2001), 84.

⁵⁸ Oxford English Dictionary (2010).

approaches to describing legitimacy in either normative or empirical terms. These elements parallel two types of validity claims discussed by Habermas in his theory of communicative action: those describing the relationship between the speaker and “the world of legitimate (social) orders,” and those between the speaker and the representation of “states and events.”⁵⁹ *Authority*, a third type of validity claim identified by Habermas, was considered in the last chapter as a factor used to determine which elites can make the most effective claims for the legitimacy of their discourse.

Appropriateness concerns the emotional and rational evaluation of the norms, beliefs, or other social standards on which the actions proposed by discourse depend. As public opinion scholar James A. Stimson notes, values of this type are the most stable form of public perception: when policy options are presented as “value A versus the status quo,” the preference is almost always to change the status quo consistent with prevailing attitudes on A.⁶⁰ In political terms, values presented in this fashion are valence issues—a topic of public discussion “that is uniformly liked or disliked”—as opposed to position issues “on which opinion is divided.”⁶¹ Politicians, military leaders, and their public supporters and critics can and do use rhetoric that leverages public consensus on valence issues to avoid critical discourse on position issues. But there are strong counterweights to this approach, because strategy involves “debates about valued alternatives” rather than situations defined by a single, dominant value.⁶² Thus nearly all Americans may be against the idea of government corruption considered in isolation, but efforts to curb corruption with stricter

⁵⁹ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (trans. 1984), 308.

⁶⁰ Stimson (1999), 26-28.

⁶¹ McLean and McMillan (2009), 548.

⁶² Stimson (1999), 8.

regulations on campaign financing raise questions about citizens' rights to support candidates of their choosing.⁶³ Most similar attempts to define a foreign policy situation as a valence issue open the door to opponents ready to invoke other, often equally salient values. This creates a situation in which one or both sides eventually must address the values at stake in a critical fashion as position issues.

During the Spanish-American War, President McKinley and others often appealed to the nation's "manly duty" to civilize and uplift the inhabitants of Spain's former colonies in accordance with Christian values—the mission that Rudyard Kipling ennobled in his poem "The White Man's Burden."⁶⁴ In response to this "strange subversion of all we have hitherto held dear in our political life," Andrew Carnegie in March 1899 provided a different perspective on Christian duty through the words of Abraham Lincoln:

Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defence is in the spirit which prizes *liberty as the heritage of all men in all lands everywhere*. Those who deny *freedom to others* deserve it not for themselves and under a just God cannot long retain it.⁶⁵

Here, Carnegie countered one belief supporting American imperialism—the Christian call to charity toward less fortunate souls—with alternative beliefs in freedom and God's retribution against oppressors.

What this clash of *fin de siècle* imperialists and anti-imperialist demonstrates in the practice of justifying American strategy is also true with respect to general theories of legitimacy. Normative accounts of legitimacy—

⁶³ Vogel (2010).

⁶⁴ Brewer (2009), 37.

⁶⁵ Carnegie (1899), 372.

which in modern Western thought extend in a long line from Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant—include a wide range of possible criteria for legitimate governance and international cooperation. Realists can point to consensus among political elites in a balanced power system, or cooperation within networks of issues and regimes where compliance with rules maximizes material self-interest.⁶⁶ Idealists, for their part, split on whether legitimacy derives from inputs to the system, such as popular sovereignty, or outputs from the system, such as human rights.⁶⁷ In addition to the lack of critical agreement on positive principles for legitimacy, there is reasonable concern that such criteria could be negatively appropriated for ideological ends—as happened in the case of the Nazi-era constitutional scholar Carl Schmitt.⁶⁸

Since evaluations of appropriateness often are stymied by the conflict of one or more accepted values, *consequence* often plays a more prominent role in disputes over the validity of strategy by focusing attention away from assertions of value and toward the rational conformity of ends and means with perceived facts. “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain,” the hero of Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell of Arms* says when reflecting on his battlefield experiences. “Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the number of regiments and the dates.”⁶⁹ In the more prosaic but equally concrete fashion of

⁶⁶ For representative texts, see, respectively, Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace, 1812-1822* (1957), and Keohane (1984).

⁶⁷ For an influential argument for input legitimacy, see Beetham (1991). For an extended argument in favor of output legitimacy, see Beck (2005).

⁶⁸ Schmitt (trans. 2004). For various engagements with Schmitt’s legacy, see Dyzenhaus, ed. (1998).

⁶⁹ Hemingway (1929), 184-185.

government bureaucracy, the Iraq Study Group advised in 2006 that the United States “deserves a debate” on its Iraq strategy “that prizes substance over rhetoric,” which the group sought to provide in more than 90 pages of factual assessments and detailed policy recommendations.⁷⁰

Following in the tradition of Max Weber, many scholars have tried to move beyond abstract, external values by seeking legitimacy in the observation of the facts that describe it.⁷¹ These empirical or consequentialist approaches to legitimacy typically shift the focus from the intentions of rulers to the satisfaction of the ruled. Describing the legitimacy of regimes and policies from a domestic political perspective, empiricists trailing David Easton have seen legitimacy rooted in the quantifiable support of a population, measured by opinion polling or the frequency of observable political behavior.⁷² Looking at sources of global instability, Ted Gurr and others have located the cause of unrest in the failed material aspirations that lead large numbers of people to withdraw their consent to be governed.⁷³ Structuralists such as Theda Skocpol criticize Gurr’s idea of a spontaneous, collectively rational granting or withholding of consent, preferring to explain legitimacy or its absence in terms of observable social conditions—in Skocpol’s case, primarily the patterns of class dominance that shape the prospects for revolutionary violence and a successful replacement of regimes.⁷⁴

Because each of these theories and the countless variations they have spawned have a strong descriptive element—one can see and in some respects

⁷⁰ Baker and Hamilton (2006), ix.

⁷¹ Weber (trans. 1978).

⁷² Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (1965), and Easton, “A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support” (1975).

⁷³ Gurr (1970).

⁷⁴ Skocpol (1979).

quantify things like poll results or the effects of economic deprivation or social discrimination—they have become influential guides for action-oriented strategists intent on reversing the causes of illegitimacy that have led to insurgencies. But are arguments of consequence a more reliable touchstone of legitimacy than arguments of appropriateness? Unfortunately, they are not, for four reasons.

First, a purely empirical approach offers no prescriptive value, since legitimacy can be defined as nothing more than the state of being observed as legitimate.⁷⁵ In order to define what is lacking and therefore what must be supplied to achieve legitimacy, one must make theoretical assumptions about what seekers of legitimacy value in specific cases. These assumptions about personal motivations for behaviors that build or destroy legitimacy are not much different than the arguments made for imposing external standards of legitimacy.

Second, the quantitative approaches adopted by Easton, Gurr, and others often imply that all members of society possess an equal distribution of some quality of legitimacy, such as votes or individual willingness to participate in anti-government activities. As Rodney Barker points out, though, it is reasonably clear that there is a “differential distribution” of legitimacy-granting power among various social groups and individuals.⁷⁶ The dominant narrative of the Iraq war, for example, credits the recruitment of Sunni sheikhs in Anbar

⁷⁵ Barker, *Legitimizing Identities* (2001), 7-12.

⁷⁶ Barker, *Political Legitimacy and the State* (1990), 109.

Province—rather than a general rise in popular support—as the key step toward limiting the legitimacy and power of insurgents there.⁷⁷

Third, empirical accounts of domestic or foreign support are difficult to operationalize as guides to specific strategic decisions. Reviewing decades of research on public opinion, Holsti concludes that there is “greater persistence than change in public attitudes toward foreign affairs,” but this persistence is expressed in broad strokes that reject extremes of unilateralism or isolationism while remaining ill-informed on specific policy options and effects.⁷⁸ Similarly, Stimson argues that the public’s policy preferences are characterized by a “zone of acquiescence” on multiple policy options between liberal and conservative extremes. That zone widens in cases where the perceived benefits of various options are less apparent to the public and the personal information costs of understanding the policy options are relatively high—conditions which are common to many foreign policy issues.⁷⁹ Addressing the difficulty of quantifying public support in COIN, the US military field manual notes rather cryptically that polls “can be a valuable, though imprecise, means of gauging support for the [host nation] government and support for the insurgency.”⁸⁰ The manual identifies nine high-level tasks for those analyzing the insurgent threat to government legitimacy, derived from more than 35 different sources and 43 different factors or capabilities that represent nothing short of comprehensive, detailed knowledge of a society and its discontents.⁸¹

⁷⁷ L. Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (2008), 104-105, 153-154, and 278-279.

⁷⁸ Holsti (2006), 262.

⁷⁹ Stimson (1999), 22.

⁸⁰ US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 106.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 79-135.

Finally, seemingly rational arguments of consequence tend to weigh factors according to their emotional urgency or impact. This is especially true of violence, a fact that is crucial for an understanding of critical discourse about the legitimacy of COIN warfare. For a significant minority of observers, violence becomes an instantly valid indicator of the strong actor's excesses or the weak actor's ability to resist, mainly because of its visual nature and the immediacy of the emotions it provokes.

Historian Michael Sherry suggests that the devastation caused by Allied strategic bombing in World War II was partly attributable to the fact that reporters could not depict "the hell unfolding on the ground... In a visual culture, the war was in some ways a movie for many Americans, one in which much of the war never appeared."⁸² As electronic communications have improved the ability of audiences worldwide to track the lethal effects of military operations, officials have become more sensitive to justifying violence in terms of its consequences for the enemy, contrasting the fact of violent death with the fact of diminished capacity for further aggression. Even as early as May 1944, Lieutenant General Barney Giles, chief of the Air Staff, provided the following guidance to commanders of American bombing units:

[The Army Air Force] has suffered in the past from misguided enthusiasm. Histrionic overstatements of its potentials have resulted in public misunderstandings of what is the mission of the AAF.... [That mission] has never been to break the enemy's will to fight by direct air attack against the morale of his people, [but rather to destroy] physical things upon which the enemy's ability to fight are dependent.... [P]ublic utterances or statements of AAF

⁸² Sherry (1995), 96.

officers should be restrained. They should be factual and wholly objective and not fanciful nor speculative.⁸³

Of course, privileging one set of consequences over another can create its own type of falsehood, even while remaining factually accurate. Thus, when Major General Lauris Norstad briefed Washington reporters in May 1945 on the results of recent air attacks against Tokyo, estimates of the area of industrialized land destroyed or the number of factory workers left homeless failed to capture the true cost of the air war on a major city subjected to merciless firebombing.⁸⁴

The Vietnam-era practice of providing body counts for operations has become a particularly notorious example of the tendency to distort the significance of the consequences of violence. Although widely portrayed after the fact as an exercise in official propaganda, one Air Force officer assigned to the Office of Information in Saigon attributed the body-count mentality to the military's attempt to meet reporters' demands for daily, objective, quantifiable information:

The media guys who were there ... they had created part of this problem themselves ... the business of body-counts and inflated body counts ... there was a lot of that that went on, and it was a bad thing on the part of the Army and the Air Force and others. But the media forced a lot of that. The media wanted to know who won the game last night.... It was insignificant in comparison with the big picture. And, that was the problem. I think the media never really saw the big picture.⁸⁵

For Colonel William McGinty, a senior public affairs officer in Vietnam in 1966, the relentless presentation of facts in the daily military briefings that came to be

⁸³ Giles (1944), 1.

⁸⁴ Norstad (1945).

⁸⁵ Dalton (1995), 48.

known as the Five O’Clock Follies “sounded like a Salvation Army drum, ‘Boom, boom, boom.’ Same old thing.”⁸⁶ Numbers were at best an insufficient representation of reality and at worst an invitation to inflated reporting and unjustified optimism in statistical trends that resembled progress only in the most superficial terms.

The temptations to exploit the meaning of violent acts are also strong outside government circles. Once television surpassed newspapers in penetration of US households, American civil rights leaders planned confrontations that would maximize the visual disparity between unarmed protestors and government authorities on film. The images of neatly dressed black youths being attacked with dogs, sticks, and fire hoses mobilized emotional support behind the movement—even when, as with the *New York Times* 4 May 1963 photograph of Birmingham high school student Walter Gadsden, the victims of violence were actually bystanders who were indifferent or opposed to the protestors’ cause.⁸⁷ Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman observes that, in contrast to the expectations placed on governments to prevent all acts of mass violence, “the measure of success for the terrorists has become simply the ability to act.” The immediate effect of any violent act transmitted by visual media is “to rekindle worldwide the same profound fears and anxieties that the attacks on 9/11 ignited.”⁸⁸

The powerful causal impressions made by acts of violence bolster Gil Merom’s thesis that democracies lose limited wars because they present a no-win situation with regard to acceptable means. Governments are forced to

⁸⁶ McGinty (1995), 22.

⁸⁷ G. Roberts and Klibanoff (2007), 269 and 316-323.

⁸⁸ Hoffman (2006), 295.

either accept violent losses of their own troops that are unacceptable for the attainment of limited objectives, or they must adopt brutal methods that are repugnant to democratic values.⁸⁹ Merom's analysis defines an important dilemma for democracies undertaking military action, but the undesirable consequences of violence are not a comprehensive explanation for state failures in these cases.

As Ivan Arreguín-Toft points out, although Merom emphasizes the role of opposing discourse in facilitating state failure, he ignores the possibility, supported by historical precedents, that such discourse could facilitate strategic success by promoting the less violent course of conciliation.⁹⁰ Merom also underestimates the ways in which the immediate consequences of violence can work in favor of the stronger actor. As the United States gained the upper hand in World War II, government censors released more graphic photos of US casualties to stress the need for continued public sacrifice and violence against its enemies.⁹¹ Conversely, the violent attacks ordered by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq had the effect of alienating Zarqawi's terrorist group from both the population and al Qaeda's leadership.⁹² History and polling data both indicate that there is limited evidence for a one-way, democratic aversion to violence either by or against its citizens.

In fact, to the extent that public opinion polls can provide insights for strategists, recent US wars indicate that public support is linked to broader critical arguments about appropriateness and consequence. Building on the public opinion research of Bruce Jentleson and others during the period after

⁸⁹ Merom (2003).

⁹⁰ Arreguín-Toft (2005), 15.

⁹¹ Roeder (1993).

⁹² Fishman (2006).

the Cold War, Richard C. Eichenberg concludes that American public support for wars is tied most strongly to popular understanding of the principal policy objective of the strategy, with strong support for deterring aggression but weak support for intervening in civil wars. Support for the policy objective is trailed by evaluations of risks versus the prospects for success, followed more distantly by the backing of allies.⁹³

Clearly, the relationship of all these consequences to the success of military operations is central to objective considerations of strategy. Strategists must devote their attention to a large number of emerging or existing facts—military and civilian casualties, the material capabilities of host nations, the length of time required to produce discernible change, and much more—in the expectation that patterns of inputs and outputs will build a cumulative power to change minds. However, it is also clear that subjective beliefs about the reasons for conflict are important for the legitimacy of action. Is there a point at which facts outweigh values, at which consequence trumps appropriateness? That is difficult to say, other than noting that such a situation may be slow to develop. The Vietnam War continued for five years after manifest deceptions and errors ended Johnson's political career, and the United States and its allies have been fighting to modest effect in Afghanistan for more than a decade.

One of the strongest critiques of American strategy prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is that planning for stability after the conflict was based, in Thomas Ricks's words, on "basic assumptions, all of which ultimately would

⁹³ Eichenberg (2005). For more detailed discussion of the principal policy objective in US public opinion, see also Jentleson (1992). Additional support for the idea that public support depends on evaluations of the moral appropriateness of the war as well as the real consequences or objective prospects for success can be found in Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005).

prove false.”⁹⁴ In answer to this failure, many commentators have proposed a more comprehensive approach to tightening the consequential nuts and bolts of strategy. William Martel, for one, proposes a “pretheory of victory” that will focus preliminary policy discussions on the ends states seek in conflict—such as the desired change in the status quo—in equal measure to the national means required to meet those ends—such as the level of social mobilization for war or post-conflict obligations.⁹⁵ As rationally sound as this aspiration is, history demonstrates that few victors begin a conflict with what could be considered a completely valid strategy, and strategists cannot trust in easy consensus on acceptable ends and effective means before circumstances require action. A strategy that argues its own legitimacy therefore begins with the expectation that the outcome will look less like a road to decision than a continuous cycle in which the meaning of objectives and the likelihood of success are continuously debated. When questions of appropriateness and consequence are by necessity left unanswered, strategists must look for other ways to promote legitimacy.

Equity: Inclusiveness, Transparency, and Autonomy. Agreement on the theoretical argument presented so far in this chapter and the last—that strategy is process of critical discourse about legitimacy with the ultimate objective of expanding elite ownership of the strategy—requires strategists to place emphasis on form as well as content. Although much of the business of strategy is about finality—decisions made, plans put into action, problems solved—commitments to the substantive or valid nature of strategy come only after a commitment to the procedure of making strategy. In the absence of easy

⁹⁴ Ricks, *Fiasco* (2006), 110.

⁹⁵ Martel (2007).

agreements on content, what legitimacy a strategy can claim rests on questions of proper form.

The importance of form or procedure to the legitimacy of military strategy is evident in the endurance of principles of war in military doctrine. Even Clausewitz, criticizing Antoine-Henri Jomini and his followers for ignoring the complexity of war in pursuit of a simple, practical theory, devoted the bulk of his treatise to general conclusions on the battlefield situations and geometries that informed the Jominian system.⁹⁶ This is as it should be, because such principles perform the important work of enabling the reproduction of strategy across time, space, and unique historical cases. Faced with a complex problem, the strategist always can start by defining an objective, then identifying a center of gravity or line of least resistance appropriate for achieving that objective, and so on. Principles of war, in other words, outline procedural norms for military strategists, defining the aspects of a problem that a proper strategy will address. Determining how discussions on strategy should proceed is thus as important as the outcome of the discussions.

Traditional studies of discursive form often begin with some variation of Aristotle's typology of rhetorical appeals based on the character of the speaker (*ethos*), the psychology or emotions of the listener (*pathos*), or the validity of the argument (*logos*).⁹⁷ These approaches confuse Aristotle's strategies for arguing the validity of a position with the proper elements of a situation in which such

⁹⁶ The classic approach to simplifying war into a system of principles can be found in Jomini (trans. 1862). For Clausewitz's critique of Jomini and other popular military theorists of his era, see Clausewitz (trans. 1976), 133-140. Clausewitz's own grappling with general principles can be found in Books Four through Seven of *On War*. For an extended consideration of Clausewitz, Jomini and other classical theorists in relation to enduring principles of war, see Handel (2006).

⁹⁷ Aristotle (trans. 1924). For a recent application of Aristotle's concepts to discourse during US military operations, see Secunda and Moran (2007).

arguments can take place. At best, the path of rhetoric leads back to the importance of validity claims. By using the consequences of violence to engender *pathos* for its victims, for example, speakers can force audiences who would otherwise lack such empathy to reconsider the policies responsible for that violence. At worst, the rhetorical method of analysis allows observers to cynically reject all discourse as an exercise in the self-interested manipulation of facts and emotions.

The ideal speech situation that Habermas poses in his theory of communicative action provides a better description of the proper form of critical rather than purely instrumental discourse. Habermas assumes that common experiences and values in complex modern societies—what he calls the lifeworld—are not always presumed to be valid but are subject to critical reflection and rational debate. This process of reflection and debate is organized by social and institutional procedures that formalize critical communication for the purpose of socially meaningful action. Such communication is not the only source of justification for action or inaction, but for important issues it serves the purpose of pointing state power in acceptable directions. Habermas theorizes that discourse becomes pathological when colonized by instrumental aspects of the modern administrative system, rather than adhering to the values and methods of the lifeworld that provides the only source of meaning for the system.⁹⁸ Stated simply, Habermas sees critical discourse degrading when quantities like money or votes substitute for the

⁹⁸ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, (trans. 1984), vol. 2.

equity of communication, defined as the “fairness” or “impartiality” of the process of communicating.⁹⁹

It is impossible to disconnect lifeworld from system or discourse from power in a way that strictly conforms to this ideal speech situation. Yet it also seems clear that those elites who cannot be bribed or coerced to support a strategy generally seek *equity* in critical discourse, in which the procedures applied to developing and implementing a plan of action approach the standards of the ideal speech situation by respecting specific values. These values are presented diffusely using a variety of terms throughout Habermas’s extensive body of work, but they may be summarized succinctly as the *inclusiveness* of discourse, the *transparency* of information and procedures relevant to that discourse, and the *autonomy* of discourse participants.

Elites and the general public with democratic societies in most cases expect the free expression of a wide range of opinions, especially on questions of war. For example, in 2001 and 2003, strong popular majorities favored US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and elites who may have opposed these wars were relatively silent. But Pew Research polls still expressed healthy support (in the range of 70 to 75 percent) for the right of public dissent, even in the form of anti-war protests. A large majority of Americans surveyed at those times said that they had heard too little rather than too much from the war’s opponents—a clear vote of confidence for an equity of views, even if lacking the resolve to actively express, seek out, or consider those views.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Oxford English Dictionary (2010).

¹⁰⁰ Results cited in Holsti (2006), 300.

Although more distant in time and scope from America's recent counterinsurgency wars, the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the resulting Treaty of Versailles make a clear historical case for the importance of equity in critical discourse on strategic issues. As Henry Kissinger observes:

The First World War began as a typical cabinet war, with notes being passed from embassy to embassy, and telegrams being distributed among sovereign monarchs at all the decisive steps on the road to actual combat. But once war had been declared, and as the streets of European capitals filled with cheering throngs, the conflict ceased being a conflict of chancelleries and turned into a struggle of the masses.¹⁰¹

Whatever nostalgia the diplomats in Paris or commentators like Kissinger may have had for cabinet wars and peacemaking in the exclusive mode of the nineteenth century's Congress of Vienna, the reality of the twentieth century was a demand for greater public equity in the waging of war and peace.

These hopes were captured prominently if ambiguously in President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, which raised expectations that the negotiation in Paris would reflect a new commitment to "open covenants of peace, openly arrived at," as well as "the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined."¹⁰² Margaret MacMillan characterizes the public mood of 1919 as one opposed at least in part to "secret diplomacy of the sort that had led Europe into calculating deals, rash promises and entangling alliances, and so on down

¹⁰¹ Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 220-21.

¹⁰² W. Wilson (1918).

the slope to war.”¹⁰³ Instead, the peace conference delivered something resembling this in form if not in kind.

With 27 nations invited to Paris, the conference made some effort to include the exploding numbers of groups with interests in the peace, but the omissions were egregious, starting with the deliberate exclusion of representatives from the defeated powers and the failure to involve Russian representatives. The conference’s most important decisions were made by the Supreme Council, composed of the heads of state of Great Britain, France, the United States, and Italy. Although capable men who were painfully aware of the violence recently done in the name of budding minority nationalism, treaty negotiators determined to redraw national boundaries in their countries’ favor wound up creating new aggrieved minorities—including Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia, Hungarians in Romania and Czechoslovakia, and Ukrainians in Poland. The 25-year-old Nguyen Ai Quoc—later known as Ho Chi Minh—was denied his request to submit a proposal to Wilson on behalf of greater rights for the Vietnamese people under French colonial rule.¹⁰⁴ Nor were the conference’s harmful exclusions limited to the international sphere. Wilson demolished prospects of domestic support for the treaty by not appointing a major Republican such as Taft or Senator Henry Cabot Lodge to the US delegation. Instead, Wilson was accompanied by four “cheapskates,” in Taft’s estimation, including the ineffectual Republican diplomat Henry White, whose occupation and affiliation one American editor listed satirically as “none” and “nobody.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Macmillan (2002), 13.

¹⁰⁴ Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 232-233. Gilbert (1994), 509-510 and 523.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Macmillan (2002), 6, and Combs (1986), 234.

What the conference lacked in inclusiveness it failed to make up for in public transparency. The secrecy of diplomacy had been a major source of anti-government propaganda in advance of the conference. Vladimir Lenin, for one, had spurred on the Bolsheviks with press leaks of the provisions of the “shady treaties of the tsar, which are concealed from you as one conceals a secret disease.”¹⁰⁶ Yet French premier Georges Clemenceau concluded that it would be “a veritable suicide” to allow reporters to receive daily summaries of the Supreme Council’s discussions, as the press had requested.¹⁰⁷ Aside from gossip, reporters in Paris therefore received little more concrete information on the proceedings than official communiqués and access to largely ceremonial events like the conference’s plenary session, feeding suspicions and charges of hypocrisy against the peacemakers.¹⁰⁸ Reflecting on the combined effects of Germany’s exclusion from the conference and the lack of transparency during the negotiations, Kissinger concludes:

... the months of negotiation cast the Germans beneath a pall of uncertainty, which encouraged illusions. They recited Wilson’s Fourteen Points as if by heart and, though their own peace program would have been brutal, deluded themselves into believing that the Allies’ final settlement would be relatively mild. Therefore, when the peacemakers revealed their handiwork in June 1919, the Germans were shocked and embarked on two decades of systematically undermining it.¹⁰⁹

In the end, the Treaty of Versailles represented the effective limits of critical discourse in conditions of severely constrained autonomy. To whatever extent the delegates assembled in Paris represented a world government,

¹⁰⁶ Lenin (1917), 381.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Macmillan (2002), 57.

¹⁰⁸ Brewer (2009), 81.

¹⁰⁹ Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 231.

MacMillan observes, it was a government whose power “was never as great as most people, both then and since, have assumed.”¹¹⁰ As hunger, disease, rebellion, and a dozen civil wars threatened to finish off what was left of Europe, the negotiations painted a veneer of legitimacy over political changes that were well under way before the peace conference started and that the members of the Supreme Council in any case were unable to stop.¹¹¹ What will the victors could exercise looked backwards rather than forwards, relying on coercion to force the Central Powers to accept punitive terms. Germany remained blockaded, with the threat of occupation hanging over the heads of its treaty signatories. “We are required to admit that we alone are war guilty,” the senior German delegate remarked in his opening statement at Versailles—a “lie” necessitated only by the “hundreds of thousands of non-combatants” who died after the armistice under the “cold deliberation” of Germany’s conquerors.¹¹² This rhetorical gnashing of teeth was a shallow substitute for any honest attempt to come to terms with history or the future.

It may be true, as MacMillan argues, that peacemaking in 1919 demanded more from the delegates in Paris than they possibly could hope to achieve, and that what they did achieve often has been overlooked in the hindsight of a second world war.¹¹³ But the conference’s *procedural* demands for greater inclusiveness, transparency, and autonomy were small compared with the big, substantive questions. Considered as an opportunity for critical discourse on a post-war strategy of stabilization, what is perhaps most disappointing about the Treaty of Versailles is that the participants, faced with

¹¹⁰ Macmillan (2002), 58.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 53-58.

¹¹² Quoted in Gilbert (1994), 511.

¹¹³ Macmillan (2002), 493-494.

narrow prospects for valid results, threw away any chance that they had to preserve at least some legitimacy by committing to a more equitable peace process. In Paris, Kissinger remarks, the “aristocratic, somewhat conspiratorial style of nineteenth-century diplomacy proved irrelevant in the age of mass mobilization.”¹¹⁴ In America’s twenty-first-century wars, the public imperatives of mass mobilization have largely disappeared. The public expectation of equity in critical discourse—of open covenants of war or peace, openly arrived at—has not.

As the example of the Paris Peace Conference suggests, the standards of equity become evident mostly when they are violated. Many critics have used such routine failures as empirical grounds for rejecting Habermas’s ideal speech situation as a standard for discourse, often citing the structural constraints on discourse already discussed as barriers to the ideal. Foucault and others have argued that the power relationships brought to discourse make equity a theoretic impossibility.¹¹⁵ Others contend that equity is practically impossible as a means of reaching decisions on complex domestic and international deliberations. One British delegate observed that Paris in 1919 resembled a “riot in a parrot house” because of the number of delegates at the peace conference, and Kissinger notes disapprovingly that the conference consisted of 58 different committees and 1,646 meetings.¹¹⁶ Given the imperatives for military or diplomatic action, critics contend, it is unreasonable to recommend as Habermas does that no one capable of making a relevant contribution to a decision is excluded from the discussion, or that all

¹¹⁴ Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 219.

¹¹⁵ Burchell, Gordon, and Miller (1991), 53-72.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Combs (1986). Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 232.

participants have an equal voice and freedom to speak their opinion without deception or coercion. Nor is it usually the case that discourse participants will yield their interests to the rational force of the better argument, as Habermas presumes.

These objections misrepresent the role that Habermas assigns to the ideal speech situation in his theory, where it serves as a counterfactual argument for a moral standard—as Habermas describes it, a source of maxims that “should be followed by everyone as a general law.” The pure *ought* of morality, however, is distinct from the “relative ought” of “purposive rationality” or “appropriate techniques,” which is the proper domain of ethics. Combining morality with strategic behavior aimed at the possible or the expedient, ethics provide rules for determining what is both “good for me and ... appropriate in the given situation.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, Habermas contends that the “presupposition of rationality” in the ideal speech situation does not impose “*obligations* to act rationally,” but rather “*makes possible* the process that participants understand as argumentation.”¹¹⁸ As Risse observes, there is theoretical and empirical support for the idea that public discourse both assumes and imposes such ethical standards—forcing participants to argue in rational rather than self-interested terms and otherwise adapt the form and substance of their discussions to account for others’ awareness of their motivations.¹¹⁹

Equity in critical discourse therefore should be understood in terms of a practical ethics that brings moral considerations into strategic behavior by determining how principles of inclusiveness, transparency, and autonomy are

¹¹⁷ Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (trans. 1993), 3-7.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 31 (emphasis in original).

¹¹⁹ Risse (2000), 17.

followed in situations where the consequences of action or the appropriateness of conflicting values and interests are in doubt. David Estlund posits a three-step political process that describes the practical application of ideals of equity in democratic systems. First, the ideal speech situation helps identify deviations from appropriate discourse within the political process—for example, when politicians advance a specific trade policy before consulting with the representatives of labor groups affected by that policy. An ethic of *wide civility* then enables such deviations to be addressed with counter-deviations—as when union members respond to their exclusion from the process by launching public protests that mischaracterize the potential effects of the policy. These counter-deviations move political deliberation closer to the ideal of equity, both by creating an immediate need to respond more equitably to public dissent and by formal or informal rules designed to prevent future deviations.¹²⁰

Although actors as a general rule have few immediate incentives to complicate strategic deliberations by taking positive steps to open up their discussions, pervasive expectations of equity will create negative feedback when the strategy process is secretive and limited to a small number of like-minded elites. There are purely instrumental ways to marginalize this dissent and keep the strategy process closed, as President Richard M. Nixon did in his appeals to the “great silent majority” for patience with the Vietnam War.¹²¹ The gamble here is that the strategy must appear to be working as advertised, because the failure of a closed strategy can translate into a rapid and enduring loss of legitimacy for policy makers, military strategists, and the very idea of armed intervention. As the experiences of Presidents Nixon and George W. Bush

¹²⁰ Estlund (2006).

¹²¹ See Chapter 1.

demonstrate, pride cometh before the fall when denying elites equity in a strategy. A safer bet may be to open the strategy process to a larger number of elites.

This negative pressure is particularly acute in the case of COIN, which represents an uneasy alliance of coercion and attraction involving military violence, economic incentives, lofty ideals of accountable governance, and thus a great deal of arguing over the validity of relevant values and facts. The two material faces of COIN—coercion and capital—increase the likelihood that actors will be less autonomous in their interactions. The proliferation of elites with stakes in the outcome of the conflict raises the bar for the inclusiveness of discourse.

But the difficulty of achieving equity in critical discourse during COIN operations is not an argument against equity's relevance. If the appropriateness of desired ends and the consequence of available means remain open questions in any war the United States is fighting—as they may for the reasons discussed above—then a failure to enforce equity in discourse on the legitimacy of strategy may represent failure, period. To sustain confidence in the eventual resolution of a situation that is by its nature resistant to resolution, the continuing possibility of strategic change needs to be preserved by the trust that elites place in a process of decision making reasonably free from exclusion, suppression, coercion, or deception.

Approaching Afghanistan: Three Forms of Discourse

The chapters that follow examine America's strategy in Afghanistan from President Barack Obama's inauguration in January 2009 through the end of 2010. The change in political leadership and deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan during this period increased uncertainty about the appropriateness and consequences of US strategy, as well as the authority of its civilian and military leaders. These circumstances seemed to be the right time for critical discourse designed to refashion the strategy in a way that improved elite confidence in US ambitions and capabilities. Indeed, Obama had suggested as much during his election campaign, when he had promised a new approach to the Afghan war.¹²² The first two years of the Obama administration therefore provide an opportunity to consider how officials discussed a change in strategy, how those discussions handled problems of validity and equity, and how these methods affected elite ownership of the effort.

Each of the next three chapters will consider three specific methods of discourse about the US strategy in Afghanistan used by elites at three levels of decision and action: the strategic, the operational, and the tactical (Figure 3). The bulk of each chapter addresses three basic questions associated with the productive use of critical discourse to expand ownership of strategy:

- Did the given method of discourse resolve questions of validity?
- If there were problems with validity, did the discourse compensate by bringing more elites into the process?

¹²² See for example Obama, "Remarks in Washington, DC" (2008).

- In cases where the process did not provide more direct equity, did discourse facilitate an exchange of information through public media that would help others to understand and accept the plan and its results?

Level of Analysis	Type of Discourse	Expected Characteristics	
		Validity	Equity
Strategic	Internal strategy review	Contest of authority; bypasses questions of appropriateness	Exclusive; limited transparency and autonomy
Operational	Doctrine	Implicit authority of institutional experience and approval, contested through interpretation	Requires some inclusion, autonomy, and transparency; limited by claims to authority and secrecy
Tactical	War story	Asserts authority of personal experience; applies subjective standards of consequence and appropriateness	Seeks equity of expression; limited by need to generalize from the individual to the collective

Figure 2. Expected characteristics of discourse types

At the strategic level, discussions among the members of Obama's cabinet and a few other senior officials were the most relevant form of discourse because the president's strategy emerged directly from them. From Obama's inauguration on 20 January 2009 through the end of that year, the administration was concerned primarily with two reviews of its strategy: one ending with the 27 March announcement of a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the other ending on 1 December with a speech at West Point in

which Obama restated his policy on Afghanistan and committed another 30,000 military personnel to the war.¹²³ The focus of discourse during this *strategy review period* was defining the strategy for a relatively small number of administration officials and political observers in Washington.

Because such internal policy discussions included only a select group of senior officials, the strategy review could be expected to provoke two competing impulses. On the one hand, officials would compete for influence over the president's decision. On the other hand, the freedom of dissent would be limited by norms of behavior within the policy process and the requirement for all officials to publicly support the outcome. In many cases, internal discussions would tend to bypass questions of appropriateness, either because officials share values and interests or because the need for unity steers them toward agreement on verifiable facts rather than irreconcilable beliefs. Outside the deliberations, excluded elites could be expected to try to influence outcomes by offering unsolicited public opinions and seeking inside information supporting those opinions. This external pressure would tend to reinforce calls for secrecy and unity within the review process, although officials who felt they were losing ground in the debate might attempt to advance their arguments through sympathetic outside channels.

Regardless of how exclusive or secret internal discussions remain, the end result of those deliberations is a more public negotiation of the strategy's finer details between high-ranking officials and the larger body of domestic and

¹²³ Obama, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan" (March 2009). Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (December 2009).

international elites who must support the strategy.¹²⁴ In the case of Afghanistan, this second phase of discourse, the *strategic performance period*, started with General Stanley A. McChrystal's arrival as the senior military commander in Afghanistan in June 2009, but it did not commence in full force until December, when Obama outlined the terms under which he would pursue the military strategy in his West Point address. Although ownership of the strategy by elites in Washington remained an open question during this time, the locus of discourse in 2010 shifted toward Afghanistan. Second-tier American military and civilian officials—as well as their Afghan and European allies—needed to define the administration's approach in terms of their own values, capabilities, interests, and circumstances. These discussions influenced public media descriptions of the strategy's performance in the field, which in turn affected the prospects for elite ownership both in Washington and abroad.

At the operational level, there were many methods used to convey the broad outlines of strategic choices and to specify how military commanders and civilian administrators were supposed to follow them. Some formal methods of discourse, such as written plans or briefings, were restricted by their classification to a limited number of people, and—because they could become lengthy exercises in bureaucratic gibberish—may have been absorbed and understood in their entirety by even fewer. Other informal methods, such as personal conversations between senior officials and their subordinates, could make stronger impressions on a small number of participants but remained

¹²⁴ For a more thorough discussion of this and the following general points on the implementation of strategic decisions, see Halperin and Clapp (2006), Chapters 13 and 14.

invisible or ephemeral non-events for the majority of relevant elites. In the case of Afghanistan, as in many other armed interventions, the most widespread form of operational discourse was military doctrine, which served as the intellectual starting point for other types of communication between the strategic and tactical levels.

As a means of discourse intended to promote a common approach to solving problems, US military doctrine sets a fairly high standard for transparency and encourages a free and inclusive approach to implementation. Most military and civilian officials have access to doctrine, and because it is not classified it can be openly discussed at all organizational levels and shared with outsiders through public media. Current COIN doctrine in particular expects that leaders and those under their authority will apply it in “flexible, adaptive ... agile, well-informed, culturally astute” ways involving “extensive coordination and cooperation with many intergovernmental, host-nation, and international agencies.”¹²⁵

At the same time, doctrine depends on the authority of the “historical studies” and “contemporary experiences” it synthesizes into “principles and guidelines” that should be followed.¹²⁶ Therefore, the implicit authority of doctrine—combined with institutional standards of secrecy that inhibit information sharing—can be at odds with the free, diverse, and cooperative application of doctrinal concepts. Discourse about doctrine thus may become a contest for authority between organizations with various interpretations of how to translate ideas into action.

¹²⁵ US Army and Marine Corps (2007), xlv.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, xlv.

Elites charged with implementing the Afghanistan strategy at the tactical level interpreted doctrine and provided feedback to their superiors primarily through *war stories*—defined as personal narratives from the field designed to provide collective lessons on the validity of strategy. Although the term conjures the image of two soldiers trading boasts about their own exploits, war stories can be about other people. They can be negative or positive accounts from civilians or military personnel. A diplomatic cable relaying personal observations or private conversations about a wartime ally, for example, is a kind of war story. Public media make constant use of war stories, presenting evocative personalities or experiences that illustrate abstract concepts.

War stories exhibit a fundamental tension between their individual and collective meaning. The narratives draw their authority from their personal authenticity: the information being conveyed is something that was seen, heard, or felt at a time and place where strategy was becoming reality. However, this apparent objectivity is ultimately subjective, since it offers no guarantee that the same or similar events were experienced by other people in an identical way. Individual views about an event or issue also may change over time—making it almost as difficult to generalize the views of one person, much less to allow that person's views to represent an entire class. For these reasons, the influence of authentic war stories needs to be tempered with the recognition that in most cases only a large number of views from many different sources can serve as a firm basis for evaluating strategy.

The benefit of analyzing the Afghanistan case through the Obama administration's strategy review, COIN doctrine, and war stories lies in tracing the development and exposition of the strategy throughout Weber's hierarchy of

rulers and administrative staff—that is, from the president down to the troops in the field. Of course, discourse by its nature is continuous, repetitive, and pervasive, so organizing the discussion of a complex strategic issue over two years in this way overlooks many important things that were said or done in relation to the strategy. The method of analysis used for the case study simplifies discourse on Afghanistan in three significant ways.

First, the operative strategy in Afghanistan is considered as an American product and process, controlled by the US government and informed by English-language media's coverage of the conflict. The experiences and perspectives of Afghans and coalition members from more than 40 other countries are ignored except where they factor into the arguments and actions of American elites. The exclusion of foreign experiences and perspectives is not intended to suggest that they are unimportant to the real success of strategy, but rather to recognize that their importance in the process of making *national* strategy depends on how they enter into a dialogue that is dominated by national voices. A strategy intended to advance American interests and values usually requires support from elites outside the United States, but their impact on strategy—considered as a process for producing a plan of action, rather than the actions themselves—is typically indirect. Foreigners affect the direction of American strategy by using their power and influence to change the minds of leading Americans.

Another obvious drawback to focusing on methods of discourse that received considerable public attention at the time is that such an approach ignores what may be the decisive impact of private interactions that will become clear only as more information is revealed over time. Although private meetings

and classified correspondence undoubtedly influenced the strategy, many documents and multiple accounts of internal meetings already have become public. More importantly, public discourse was probably more decisive than private discourse given the large number of elites who needed to support the Obama administration's strategy—a complex operation in a country of 29 million people, involving hundreds of thousands of Afghan and coalition troops, government officials, aid workers, and community leaders.

Finally, restricting the study to discourse by or about US government agents omits important areas of nongovernmental discourse. For example, American anti-war activists used a variety of public media—such as the *Rethink Afghanistan* film, blog, and video-sharing site—to develop their positions and organize local political opposition to the Obama administration's strategy.¹²⁷ By treating these kinds of efforts as secondary to government discourse in the formation of elite opinions, the study assumes that the chief concern of strategy as critical discourse is the ways in which government figures choose to communicate. Although government voices are not the ones that matter most in a democracy, they are the ones that matter most to a nation's foreign policy—at least between elections. The best chance for national security decisions that reflect the will of the people is a conception of strategy as a process of critical discourse that argues its legitimacy in the interest of securing the diverse elite support necessary for long-term success.

¹²⁷ Brave New Foundation (2011).

Summary of Critical Discourse Theory

Based on the theoretical foundations established in this and the previous chapter, strategy as critical discourse can be viewed as working in parallel with a traditional strategy that guides actions toward desired outcomes. Since those actions require various material and moral resources that the strategist does not possess, however, diverse elite ownership of a common plan of action—the strategy, in its traditional sense—is necessary. Critical discourse about the legitimacy of the strategy therefore becomes a crucial path to success (Figure 2).

There are two ways to sustain elite ownership of strategy through critical discourse. The first is to persuade elites of the validity of the strategy, which depends on developing a consensus on the appropriateness of the values associated with the strategy, the consequences of strategic action, and the authority of elites who are supporting the plan. Early on, the validity of a strategy may be self-referential and its ownership limited, as when the strategy exists as a secret plan known only to a small group of officials. Eventually, however, other elites whose support is needed to execute the strategy or sustain the authority of its authors will learn about the plan and evaluate it against outcomes that are observed or predicted. Consensus therefore often requires changing the original strategy in a way that incorporates the concerns of a larger number of elites.

Arguments of appropriateness, consequence, and authority are used to cross-validate each other, but disagreements in one or more areas can increase uncertainty about the strategy rather than resolve it. In these cases, legitimacy depends on the second method for promoting elite ownership of strategy:

increasing the equity of the process. To improve equity, individuals and groups with reasonable claims to authority must be included in critical discourse affecting the direction of strategy, and their participation must be autonomous in the sense of being reasonably free from coercion or manipulation. Those with power to control information about the strategy must provide enough transparency to ensure that elites can assess both the validity of arguments and the equity of the process.

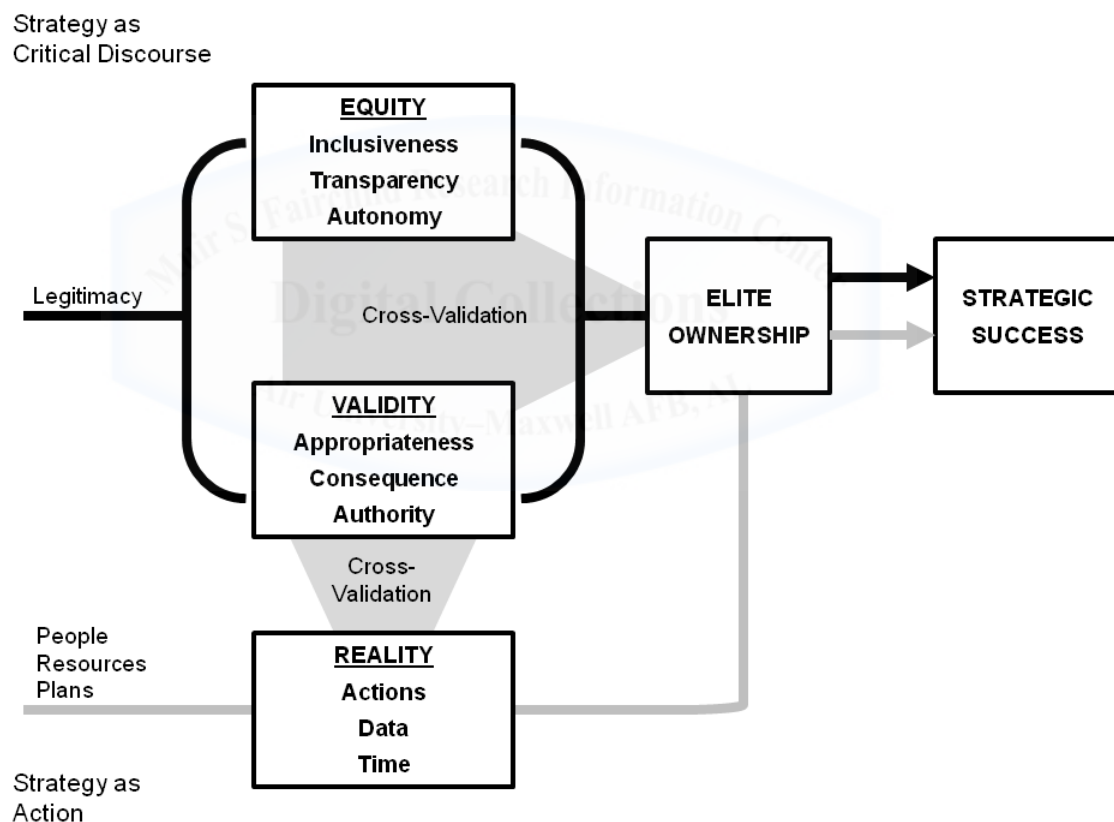


Figure 3. Strategy as critical discourse in relation to strategy as action.

Although lack of sufficient consensus on a strategy may argue for greater equity, opening the process is a choice and not a guarantee. Policy makers

have powerful personal and institutional preferences for controlling information and minimizing other elites' influence on strategy. Officials may use their power to develop and implement a specific strategy without seeking broader elite support, but when they do they are asserting unique claims to authority that make them more politically vulnerable if the strategy falters. Challenges to authority can create pressure to increase equity, but officials may respond to that same pressure with more secrecy, silence, or manipulation. Such abuses of power might encourage insiders to defect from a closed process by engaging in critical discourse, but defectors can be punished for violating professional norms of discretion or loyalty.

Even when officials open the process, equity can only carry strategy so far. Elites granted access to the strategy process will begin to look for evidence that actions are advancing their values and interests. For elites to be satisfied with the strategy in the long run, equity has to produce validity. Material outcomes need to be pursued and understood in the context of a critical discourse that has defined what the strategy should achieve in terms that are acceptable to the majority of relevant elites.

In response to the violence and rabble-rousing politics that swept Rome during the civil wars of his era, Cicero remarked “*Silent enim leges inter arma*. [In time of war, law is silent.]”¹²⁸ But when the war is over political legitimacy itself, it may be that law is not so much silent as it is impotent—unable to assert its authority, champion its values, or impose its consequences, because those who must respect the law instead doubt its validity. On the verge of being relieved of command in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur—another

¹²⁸ Cicero (52 B.C.)

famous scold of statesmen—urged the US Congress to reject political dithering and embrace military decisiveness. For “once war is forced upon us,” MacArthur affirmed, “there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War’s very objective is victory, not prolonged indecision.”¹²⁹ Few American strategists would disagree with MacArthur’s sentiment, but his preferred wars are not the wars America now fights.

Wars for legitimacy are wars for consensus. When the means for fighting those wars fall short of total conquest and endless occupation, consensus must be created rather than imposed. The very object of strategy in a war for consensus may be something that resembles prolonged indecision: the successful continuation of critical discourse until the conflict’s ends and means are adequately defined and implemented. This is not a welcome conception of strategy for old soldiers like MacArthur, or even for young ones. But if the objective of war is a more stable peace among many people—rather than an uncertain victory on one person’s terms—critical discourse may be the more responsible way to approach the business of strategy.

¹²⁹ MacArthur (1951).

CHAPTER 3

BOXED IN: THE LIMITS OF INTERNAL DISCOURSE ON AMERICA'S STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

In the 1930's, we made our fate not by what we did but what we Americans failed to do. We propelled ourselves—and all mankind—toward tragedy, not by decisiveness but by vacillation, not by determination and resolution but by hesitancy and irresolution, not by action but by inaction.

The failure of free men in the 1930's was not of the sword but of the soul—and there just must be no such failure in the 1960's.

— President Lyndon B. Johnson
at a Democratic Party Dinner in Cook County, Illinois
3 June 1965¹

What has happened ... that requires this decision on my part? What are the alternatives?... Have we wrung every single soldier out of every country we can? Who else can help? Are we the sole defenders of freedom in the world? Have we done all we can in this direction? The reasons for the call up? The results we can expect? What are the alternatives?... Let's look at all our options so that every man at this table understands fully the total picture.

— President Lyndon B. Johnson
in the White House
21 July 1965²

On 15 July 2008, Barack Obama made what had become an obligatory step for American presidential candidates by publicly pledging to be a more

¹ L. B. Johnson (1965).

² Quoted in Goldstein (2008), 210.

decisive commander in chief. “Instead of being distracted from the most pressing threats that we face, I want to overcome them,” he said. He asked his Washington audience to imagine “what we could have done in those days, and months, and years after 9/11,” to include deploying “the full force of American power to hunt down and destroy Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and all of the terrorists responsible for 9/11, while supporting real security in Afghanistan.”³ The threat to America posed by instability in Central Asia was real, the candidate argued. “If another attack on our homeland comes,” Obama predicted, “it will likely come from the same region where 9/11 was planned.” But current US commitments to Afghan security fell short of the need, in the candidate’s opinion. “Our troops and our NATO allies are performing heroically in Afghanistan,” Obama said, “but I have argued for years that we lack the resources to finish the job because of our commitment to Iraq... And that’s why, as President, I will make the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be. This is a war that we have to win.”

The specific steps Obama recommended that day were comprehensive: two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan, greater contributions from NATO allies, training for Afghan security forces, support for the rule of law, a “bottom up” program of economic development, and pressure on Pakistan to stabilize its bordering tribal areas with a tough-love approach that combined increased operations against insurgents and US economic assistance to the Pakistani people.⁴ As a newly elected president, the details of Obama’s initial plans for aiding Afghanistan remained consistent. The president deployed two

³ Obama, “Remarks in Washington DC” (2008). The remaining quotes in this paragraph are taken from the same speech.

⁴ Ibid.

brigades—one Marine, one Army—in February 2009.⁵ Announcing his new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan on 27 March 2009, the president promised to “increase the size of Afghan security forces,” to “help the Afghan government serve its people and develop an economy that isn’t dominated by illicit drugs,” to foster government and economic initiatives through “a dramatic increase in our civilian effort,” and to provide \$7.5 billion in aid to Pakistan over five years while pressing for military action against the extremist “cancer that risks killing Pakistan from within.”⁶

Few Americans disagreed with their president, especially on the need for a larger military effort. A February 2009 Gallup poll established that a majority of Americans, regardless of their political affiliation, approved of Obama’s decision to send 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, with 77 percent of all the president’s supporters backing a hypothetical increase of another 13,000 personnel.⁷ In a March 2009 review of leading newspaper editorials, magazine features, and Sunday talk show segments about Afghanistan since the 2008 election, the watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting found that media endorsed a troop escalation in 31 of 47 instances.⁸ Following the 27 March strategy roll-out, the *New York Times* editorial page concluded that “President Obama has asserted leadership over the war that matters most to America’s security.”⁹ The *Washington Post* considered the strategy “conservative” for embracing “many of the recommendations of U.S. military commanders and the George W. Bush administration,” but “bold—and

⁵ DeYoung, “More Troops Headed to Afghanistan” (2009).

⁶ Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (March 2009).

⁷ Newport, “Strong Bipartisan Support for Obama’s Move on Afghanistan” (2009).

⁸ Ward (2009).

⁹ *New York Times* editorial (2009).

politically brave—because, at a time of economic crisis and war-weariness at home, Mr. Obama is ordering not just a major increase in U.S. troops, but also an ambitious effort at nation-building in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. He is right to do it.”¹⁰ Senator John McCain, Obama’s rival in the presidential race, said in a press statement that he welcomed a “long overdue change of course in Afghanistan,” and that the “broad components” of the administration’s plan “appear sound.”¹¹

During a speech later that week, McCain said he had no doubt “that in a year from now, we will be looking at a greater level of opposition to the war than we are seeing today.”¹² It was not a difficult forecast to make, but it was correct. By November 2009, public opinion on whether American should increase or decrease its presence in Afghanistan was split along party lines.¹³ By the following February, public approval of the president’s handling of the Afghan war had dipped to 48 percent.¹⁴ When a \$33 billion bill to fund the war went before the House of Representatives in July 2010, more than 100 members of the president’s party voted against it—three times more opposing votes than there had been for a similar bill the previous year.¹⁵ The *New York Times* confessed in an August editorial that “like many Americans, we are increasingly confused and anxious about the strategy in Afghanistan and wonder whether, at this late date, there is a chance of even minimal success.”¹⁶ By November 2010, a Gallup poll described public division over Obama’s

¹⁰ *Washington Post* editorial (2009).

¹¹ McCain (2009).

¹² Hornick (2009).

¹³ Jones, “Americans Split on Afghanistan Troop Increase vs. Decrease” (2009).

¹⁴ Newport, “Obama Approval on Economy Down, on Foreign Affairs Up” (2010).

¹⁵ Camia and Jagoda (2010).

¹⁶ *New York Times* editorial (2010).

announced intention to withdraw all US forces by 2014, with only one in five Americans agreeing with the timetable.¹⁷ Reporting these results, a front-page story in *USA Today* portrayed the president as “at odds with his Democratic base, which wants troops out faster, and with newly empowered Republican critics in Congress, who opposed deadlines and timetables altogether.”¹⁸

Presidents and their policies are never considered in isolation, and many things happened inside and outside Afghanistan during Obama’s first two years in office that may have contributed to this slide in support among the American public and policy elites. Widespread fraud marred Afghanistan’s presidential election in August 2009 and parliamentary elections in September 2010. Afghan President Hamid Karzai appeared to vacillate between authoritarian defiance and appeasing deference to both the international community and Afghan power brokers. The additional forces authorized by Obama grew from 17,000 to 51,000 over the course of 2009 as casualties mounted. Military offensives and civilian aid programs in Helmand and Kandahar—the southern Afghan provinces considered to be the heart of the Taliban insurgency—appeared to stumble toward only modest gains. Pakistan attacked Taliban elements that threatened its own security, but was accused of offering support or at least respite for other insurgent groups intent on destabilizing its neighbor. At home, Obama struggled with the lingering effects of a recession, a divisive fight over health care, and other issues that made the president as many political enemies as he had friends.

President Obama and senior members of his administration had direct control over few of these developments. But one series of decisions the

¹⁷ Jones, “Americans Less Pessimistic About U.S. Progress in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹⁸ Page (2010).

administration could and did make involved the discourse used to develop and explain the new strategy for Afghanistan. How did the administration choose to discuss its strategy in light of elite concerns and public expectations? How did the war that America had to win become a greater political liability for the president who pledged to win it? How did reasonably broad backing for the president's path degenerate into doubt? What does the Obama administration's experience tell us about efforts to establish the legitimacy of future wars?

Answering these questions begins with the recognition that the senior US officials participating in the 2009 review shouldered enormous responsibility not just for choosing a strategy but for doing so in a way that defined for others what was truly at stake. This chapter considers how contemporary explanations of the strategy review overstated the role of agency and structure in determining the outcome. An alternative explanation—that the Obama administration attempted to build a better strategy through critical discourse—makes it clear that what the president's team discussed and how they discussed it prevented many elites from understanding or supporting the president's decision.

Strategy Review: Clash of Titans, Mindless Militarization, or Critical Discourse?

Strategy as Pentagon Power Play. If the first draft of history for America's Afghan war is any guide, then the Obama administration's review of its strategy will be explained more often as a power struggle among senior officials than as an attempt at critical discourse. This approach is exemplified

by Bob Woodward's book-length account of the review, *Obama's Wars*, but it is reflected as well in contemporary news accounts of the review and other early books on the administration, such as Jonathan Alter's *The Promise* and Richard Wolffe's *Revival*.¹⁹

As Andrew J. Bacevich noted in his review of Woodward's book, the dominant theme of the clash of titans narrative is that politics remains "an intensely competitive sport, with the participants, whether in anger or frustration, sometimes speaking ill of one another."²⁰ In these accounts, public discourse on the Afghanistan strategy is explained as an extension of the quasi-private struggle between powerful individuals and their networks of personal influence, to which reporters have privileged access through their confidential sources. This description of the process of making strategy in 2009 continues the tradition of earlier books on the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, including Woodward's *Bush at War* series, Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco* and *The Gamble*, and Linda Robinson's *Tell Me How This Ends*.²¹

In Woodward's account, Barack Obama, a new Democratic president with an untested record on national security issues, inherits "a world that could blow up any minute in half a dozen ways," along with "some powerful but limited and perhaps even dubious tools to keep it from happening."²² Although the president had "campaign[ed] on providing Afghanistan with more troops," the Bush administration's long neglect of the region meant that basic plans and

¹⁹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010). Alter (2010). Wolffe (2010).

²⁰ Bacevich, "Prisoners of War: Bob Woodward and All the President's Men (2010 Edition)" (2010).

²¹ Woodward: *Bush at War* (2002); *Plan of Attack* (2004); *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (2006); *The War Within: A Secret White House History, 2006-2008* (2008). Ricks: *Fiasco* (2006); *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (2009). L. Robinson (2008).

²² Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 11.

assumptions needed to be revisited before Obama could make that choice.²³

Convinced that he had “two years with the public on this,” Obama specifically sought an “exit strategy” based on a thorough evaluation of the regional security situation.²⁴

What he received instead was “an unexpected and stunning strategic request” for up to 40,000 more troops—engineered by a military establishment that “was out campaigning, closing off his choices” and “systematically playing him, boxing him in,” while “the White House was losing control of the public narrative.”²⁵ Unable politically to reject the narrow options presented by his national security team, Obama was forced to accept the escalated counterinsurgency campaign he did not want, although the administration attempted to control the direction of the strategy with a cap of 30,000 rather than 40,000 additional troops and a timetable for withdrawal starting in July 2011. The result of the strategy review was an embittered, divided team and a decision that strayed from the president’s original intent.

In addition to providing abundant gossip about the ways of Washington, this clash of titans narrative provides important insights into the personal and sometimes petty dimensions of policy making. However, it has significant limitations as a means of analyzing strategy as a process. The strengths and weaknesses of Woodward’s book—as well as the other popular media accounts that support his interpretation of events—derive from timeliness. The accounts are written during or shortly after the heat of political battle, when officials are still vested in arguments for or against a decision with uncertain outcomes.

²³ Ibid., 79.

²⁴ Ibid., 110 and 253.

²⁵ Ibid., 173 and 195.

Under these conditions, individual perceptions of events can be skewed. Officials can see unity and planning in efforts that seem contrary to their preferences—the military as a whole, out to wrest the strategy from the president’s hands through a series of deliberate steps—although such centralized efforts may not exist in quite as coherent a fashion. Actors can overestimate their own importance within the process, giving undue weight to events that involved them or to the centrality of their own arguments, concerns, or perspectives. They can project their current fears or interests backwards or forwards in time as a means of rationalizing events or appearing to anticipate outcomes.²⁶ In the service of a compelling and lucid story, reporters can exaggerate these effects by offering as explanations what officials had only offered as their own impressions.

Take for example the idea that Obama was maneuvered by the military into supporting the troop surge announced in December 2009. Woodward provides this perspective on the decision on behalf of Lieutenant General Douglas E. Lute, Obama’s deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan:

Lute wondered how the president had packaged this for himself. He surmised the following: The president had fast-forwarded and figured it would most likely be ugly following July 2011. Obama had to do this 18-month surge just to demonstrate, in effect, that it couldn’t be done. The surge would be expensive, but not so much that the country could not absorb it. Obama would have given the monolithic military its day in court and the United States would not be seen as having been driven off the battlefield. The only way Lute could explain the final decision was that the president had treated the military as another political

²⁶ For a full discussion of common sources of misperception among policymakers, see Jervis (1976), Chapters 8-10.

constituency that had to be accommodated. “Because I don’t think the review adds up to the decision,” he said.²⁷

This might be an accurate description of the president’s thinking, but it is more definitely an accurate description of the state of mind of an officer who, in Woodward’s words, “felt that the military establishment was really rolling the president.”²⁸

In the mostly sympathetic account found in *Obama’s Wars*, Lute and other staff members of the National Security Council swim against the tide of escalation, questioning how an expanded COIN campaign would work without the United States having more leverage against insurgent safe havens in Pakistan or the corrupt government in Kabul.²⁹ In the interest of establishing this version of events, it is likely that Lute or Woodward (or both) would project personal concerns about the policy into their own reflections on the president’s state of mind. It is less likely—although not impossible—that Obama would accept the NSC’s predictions as foregone conclusions, accepting the certain failure of his strategy strictly to create political breathing room for an inevitable withdrawal.

Lute’s hypothesis is at least open to debate, given that by January 2011 the White House was not holding the line on a July 2011 withdrawal but rather softening it by emphasizing instead the complete transition of security operations to the Afghan state by 2014.³⁰ Nor was the surge too far afield from public commitments that Obama had made before the strategy review even

²⁷ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 338.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

³⁰ Rivera 2011.

started. In response to a question about “sources of frustration in the progressive community,” Obama told *Rolling Stone* in September 2010:

... clearly, Afghanistan has to be near the top of the list, maybe at the top of the list. I always try to point out, number one, that this shouldn't have come as any surprise. When I was campaigning, I was very specific. I said, “We are going to end the war in Iraq, that was a mistake,” and I have done that. What I also said was that we need to plus up what we're doing in Afghanistan, because that was where the original terrorist threat emanated, and we need to finish the job. That's what we're doing.³¹

Although the president mentioned adding only 17,000 combat troops and 4,000 trainers in his 27 March strategy announcement, there was no public indication at the time that this was the full extent of his military commitment.³² Likewise, in private consultations, retired General James Jones—Obama's national security adviser, Lute's boss, and an opponent of the surge in Woodward's account—reportedly advised the Pentagon that a decision on more forces was possible in 2009, after a 1 July *Washington Post* article raised concerns that Jones saw the 21,000 combat troops and trainers announced in March as a hard cap on additional personnel.³³

Even granting for a moment that the military was trying to put the president into a pro-escalation box against his wishes, it was a box that the White House and other executive agencies were within their means to escape. The public statements by military officials that Woodward and Alter cite as arguments intended to force the president to back the surge were made during the summer and early autumn of 2009. These include a 2 July *Washington*

³¹ Wenner (2010).

³² Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (March 2009).

³³ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 140-143.

Post interview with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen; a 4 September *Post* editorial by Michael Gerson based on an interview with US Central Command's General David Petraeus; Mullen's 15 September testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee; Woodward's own 21 September leak of McChrystal's classified assessment, which he says he obtained at the Pentagon while researching his book; and McChrystal's 1 October address to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.³⁴

In response, a front-page *New York Times* article on 23 September, quoting unnamed administration officials, emphasized that the president was conducting "a wholesale reconsideration" of the strategy, which included "exploring alternatives to a major troop increase."³⁵ In a 4 October interview with CNN's *State of the Union*, Jones said Mullen, Petraeus, and McChrystal "will be willing to present different options and different scenarios in this discussion that we're having," and that "it is better for military advice to come up through the chain of command."³⁶ Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates reiterated those sentiments the next day in a speech to the Association of the US Army.³⁷ After those comments, McChrystal declined interviews and public meetings that would result in him being quoted in press coverage until after the president's West Point speech, and he instructed his staff to refrain from

³⁴ Ibid., 142, 158, 172-176 and 193-194. Also Alter (2010), 377-378. For original content, see Tyson, "No Limit in Place for Pending Request on Troops in Afghanistan" (2009); Gerson (2009); Tyson, "Mullen: More Troops 'Probably' Needed" (2009); Woodward, "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure'" (2009); and Burns (2009).

³⁵ P. Baker and Bumiller, "Obama Considers Strategy Shift in Afghan War" (2009).

³⁶ S. Wilson, "McChrystal Faulted On Troop Statements" (2009).

³⁷ Gates, "Speech to Association of the United States Army" (2009).

making public comments on the review.³⁸ Other senior military officers kept a similarly low public profile on Afghanistan.

In the two months leading up to the president's announcement of the surge, therefore, the most prominent government voices in coverage of the review were White House officials and members of Congress. These articles often discussed presumed alternatives or objections to an expanded COIN campaign, such as targeted counterterrorism operations, training for Afghan security forces, reconciliation, and the importance of legitimate Afghan governance.³⁹ The biggest news story related to the strategy review in November 2009 was an argument *against* the surge: second-hand accounts of two diplomatic cables from Karl W. Eikenberry, the US ambassador to Afghanistan and a former Army general responsible for training Afghan soldiers and police. In the cables, Eikenberry was said to express "deep concerns about sending more U.S. troops to Afghanistan until President Hamid Karzai's government demonstrates that it is willing to tackle the corruption and mismanagement that has fueled the Taliban's rise."⁴⁰

Media coverage of the review therefore suggests that voices outside the military ran little risk of being squeezed out of the private or public debate. If the surge's apparent proponents were the first to draw attention, by either

³⁸ Based on the author's experience as a public affairs officer coordinating McChrystal's press events.

³⁹ The following articles from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are representative of trends in topics and sourcing: P. Baker, "Biden No Longer a Lone Voice on Afghanistan" (2009); Zeleny, "Deliberating on Afghanistan, in Plain Sight" (2009); Kornblut and Wilson, "Obama Focuses on Civilian Effort in Afghanistan Strategy Review" (2009); Tyson, "Vote Dispute Complicates U.S. Debate, Senator Says" (2009); DeYoung, "U.S. sets its sights on Taliban 'little T'" (2009); Shear, "White House and Cheney in a war of words over Afghanistan" (2009); Shanker and Cooper, "Obama Meets Joint Chiefs to Review Afghanistan Strategy" (2009); Cooper and Zeleny, "Obama Presses Afghan Leader on Corruption" (2009).

⁴⁰ Jaffe, Wilson and DeYoung, "U.S. envoy resists increase in troops" (2009). The actual cables were not published until the *New York Times* obtained copies in January 2010.

accident or design, the skeptics got in the last word, repeatedly. The extensive back-and-forth between senior officials leads Alter to describe the review as “the most methodical national security decision in a generation.”⁴¹

Undoubtedly, the 2009 strategy review exhibited some features of a power struggle, and many officials and outside observers have chosen to interpret it that way. However, framing the review exclusively or even primarily as a contest between military and civilian camps obscures the role that the narrative itself played in creating those conditions. In *Obama’s Wars*, Woodward implies that secondary issues like the size and timing of troop increases take center stage because the administration’s leadership and management failures do not produce a more substantive discussion of strategic assumptions. The debate—in an observation that Woodward attributes to Dennis C. Blair, director of national intelligence—“had a hollowness to it. The president asked good questions but quickly exhausted the wisdom of those in the room. Instead of a real in-depth discussion, there was a scripted feel.”⁴² Part of that script emerged from ongoing media coverage of the review that presented facts and opinions within the superficial clash of titans frame.

Tracing the rise of political news sites such as those run by *Politico* or *RealClearPolitics*, *New York Times* reporter Jeremy W. Peters notes these outlets “have changed the threshold for what is news, and the result is often a greater emphasis on the horse race—the kind of who’s up, who’s down reporting that proves endlessly frustrating for candidates and many readers.”⁴³ Although the popularity of specific political news sites may be recent, the practice of framing

⁴¹ Alter (2010), 372.

⁴² Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 289.

⁴³ Peters (2011).

US foreign policy as a contest of wills is a venerable journalistic tradition. Viewed as a formulaic political story, the Afghanistan surge, to become compelling, must be shown to be something more than one choice within a larger regional strategy informed by even larger policy considerations. It must become a test of manhood—a decisive issue from which Obama is retreating, with the military doing its utmost to drag him back. To the extent that officials relied on media accounts to fill in gaps in their own knowledge and to gauge how an eventual decision would be perceived publicly, they cannot be blamed for believing what they read in the papers.

In some cases, however, what officials were seeing in the public narrative oversimplified what were manifestly more nuanced personal views about strategic options and prospects for success. Obama's own early support for troop increases has been noted already, and Alter also suggests that the president was influenced by his previous opposition to the Iraq surge in the Senate, since its results enabled him to keep his campaign promises to end that war.⁴⁴ McChrystal's leaked assessment—which helped create, according to Woodward, "the appearance that the military was boxing [the president] in"—conceded that US efforts in Afghanistan had not been resourced adequately.⁴⁵ But it also emphasized that "resources are not the crux" of success in comparison to operational culture, unity of command, and effective governance—all of which have little to do with troop numbers.⁴⁶ The views of Obama and McChrystal as late as the autumn of 2009 were therefore closer to

⁴⁴ Alter (2010), 385 and 387.

⁴⁵ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 281.

⁴⁶ McChrystal, "Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Subject: COMISAF's initial assessment" (2009), 2-1.

each other in terms of their recognition of the arguments for and against escalation than the public narrative might suggest.

Indeed, when media attention of the review picked up in September 2009, the fact that reporters highlighted troop numbers and eventually timelines as the immediate stakes of an internal power struggle may have hardened officials' positions on those details into firmer opposition. Recounting a 30 September strategy review meeting, Woodward writes:

The media debate about Afghanistan had become polarized, a choice between a massive troop influx and a complete withdrawal. "Is there anybody who thinks we ought to leave Afghanistan?" the president asked. Everyone in the room was quiet. They looked at him. No one said anything. "Okay," he said, "now that we've dispensed with that, let's get on."⁴⁷

This description is delivered without irony, although just nine days earlier Woodward's own article on McChrystal's assessment helped characterize the debate as one between calls by the military and Republicans for "more forces within the next year" and the reluctance of other administration officials and Democrats "about committing more troops to an increasingly unpopular war."⁴⁸ Such framing—when attached to specific officials and parties—goes beyond establishing context for a decision to interpreting that decision as a game with specific winners and losers, thereby investing personal and professional reputations in the outcome.

In addition to its distorting effects in the particular case of the 2009 strategy review, the clash of titans narrative carries serious implications for the future of US strategy. Anthropomorphizing a conflict of ideas as a personal

⁴⁷ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 186.

⁴⁸ Woodward, "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure'" (2009).

struggle advances the idea that finding workable solutions to complex strategic problems depends on choosing the right political and military leaders.⁴⁹ Given that America's recent wars have caused problems for different senior officials in multiple administrations, this is a questionable conclusion, and one that is vulnerable to political exploitation of the throw-the-bums-out variety.

More importantly, those who contend that basic problems with strategy stem from private and public dissent among the president's advisers are implying that either good policy or good public relations requires internal consensus on major policy questions. Although it is clear that the apparent lack of agreement in the strategy review embarrassed Obama and other officials when internal debates became painfully and publicly personal, it is not clear that the process would have been better with less public awareness of what was being discussed. Because revelations of dissent among policy makers invariably receive the clash of titans treatment, leaders face a dilemma: they can either risk perceptions that their staff is divided and policy is adrift, or they can stifle dissent and restrict the flow of public information on deliberations in the interest of promoting a semblance of unity. The first scenario opens the strategy to wider condemnation, and the second favors policy advice that is more dangerously homogenized. By singling out internecine quarrels as the steamy secret of strategy's sausage-making machine, Woodward and others may have helped to deny leaders the very ingredients—informed debate and dissent, inside and outside the inner circles of power—that strategy requires.

The Long View of Militarized Policy. The relative dominance of the clash of titans narrative did not remove more substantial issues from discourse

⁴⁹ See, for example, Cohen, *Supreme Command* (2002).

during the strategy review. According to Woodward, basic questions about the Taliban, al Qaeda, Pakistan, and the Afghan government were raised—if poorly answered—throughout the process. Many influential elites outside the administration also raised these questions.

Commentary from critics of US policy often turned on whether the proposed strategy's ends and means were appropriate. Assessing the incoming president's agenda in November 2008, Bacevich argued for a more limited strategy in Afghanistan, declaring in *Newsweek* that "the United States and its allies are using the wrong means to pursue the wrong mission."⁵⁰ Before Obama's inauguration, *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert said that the goal of preventing Afghanistan "from becoming a haven for terrorists bent on attacking us" does not require "the scale of military operations that the incoming administration is contemplating."⁵¹ The September 2009 resignation of Matthew P. Hoh, the State Department's senior civilian representative in Zabul Province and a former Marine, drew significant public attention to his concerns about "the value or the worth in continued U.S. casualties or expenditures of resources in support of the Afghan government in what is, truly, a 35-year old civil war."⁵² That same month, syndicated columnist George F. Will advised that "America should do only what can be done from offshore, using intelligence, drones, cruise missiles, airstrikes and small, potent Special Forces units, concentrating on the porous 1,500-mile border with Pakistan, a nation that actually matters."⁵³

⁵⁰ Bacevich, "Afghanistan: What's Our Definition of Victory?" (2008).

⁵¹ Herbert (2009).

⁵² Hoh (2009). For coverage of Hoh's resignation, see DeYoung, "U.S. official resigns over Afghan war" (2009).

⁵³ Will (2009).

Yet these arguments for or against specific strategic choices did not claim to *explain the process* that elaborated, considered, or ignored those choices in the same way that the journalistic trope of a Washington power struggle does. The alternative explanation of the decision process that several critics of the Afghanistan strategy *did* provide centered on the entrenched militarization of US foreign policy.

Here again, Bacevich was a prominent voice. His two bestsellers that bookend the election of President Obama and the end of the administration's second year—*The Limits of Power* and *Washington Rules*—laid the blame for failed policies at the feet of a decades-long degradation of American society and its institutions. In an essentially conservative critique of a “sense of entitlement” that “has great implications for foreign policy,” Bacevich asserts that “as the American appetite for freedom has grown, so too has our penchant for empire.”⁵⁴ But the “actual exercise of American freedom” instead has led to economic, political, and military crises that are “no longer conducive to generating the power required to establish and maintain an imperial order.”⁵⁵

Bad policy persists, Bacevich argues, because “policy making has become oligarchic rather than democratic,” especially among a national security elite for whom “imperfect security is by definition inadequate security.”⁵⁶ The “ideology of national security underwrites a bipartisan consensus” characterized by “an abiding conviction that the minimum essentials of international peace and order require the United States to maintain a global military presence, to configure its forces for global power projection, and to counter existing or

⁵⁴ Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (2008), 9.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 82.

anticipated threats by relying on a policy of global interventionism.”⁵⁷ This consensus “does not prevent criticism of particular policies or policy makers,” but “it robs any debate over policy of real substance.”⁵⁸

A narrower, more liberal version of this thesis prevalent during the strategy review pointed to the military’s limited outlook and its enduring, pernicious effects on US strategy. Vietnam analogies were a common feature of these arguments. As early as January 2009, the progressive journalist and historian Gareth Porter told readers of the influential *Huffington Post* web site that Vietnam demonstrated “the U.S. army is not capable of learning,” and therefore “the military will end up simply doing more of what it knows how to do” in Afghanistan, generating “more Afghan resistance to the U.S. occupation.”⁵⁹ In October 2009 remarks at Duke University that were widely echoed by popular political news sites, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh said that a contemptuous and racist military was “in a war against the White House,” and that Obama was “either going to let the Pentagon run him or he has to run the Pentagon.”⁶⁰

The *Wall Street Journal* reported in the middle of the strategy review that senior administration officials had been reading Gordon M. Goldstein’s *Lessons in Disaster*—a book about the decisions to escalate US involvement in Vietnam that “encapsulates their concerns about accepting military advice unchallenged” and warns against coercive options that “could close off the path

⁵⁷ Ibid., 84. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (2010), 14.

⁵⁸ Bacevich, *The Limits of Power* (2008), 84.

⁵⁹ Porter (2009).

⁶⁰ For the original account of Hersh’s remarks, see Offen (2009). Among popular political sites, Hersh’s remarks were repeated over the following two weeks in Naiman (2009) and Madrak (2009).

to a more peaceful resolution.”⁶¹ Although Goldstein also discusses the harmful influence of domestic politics and presidential leadership styles, Alter concludes that the book’s main lesson for White House staffers was to avoid a “failed process in which none of the assumptions was challenged.”⁶² Woodward goes farther, grafting the book’s message onto his central power struggle by concluding that it led the White House to realize that absent “clear recommendations and decisions, the military would tend to do what they wanted to do. Clarity would have to be forced on them.”⁶³ When Mullen confesses during one meeting with the president that he sees no alternative to some form of surge, Woodward dramatizes the moment: “It was as if the ghosts of the Vietnam and Iraq wars were hovering, trying to replay the history in which the military had virtually dictated the force levels.”⁶⁴

These and similar glosses on the strategy review—in the form of either conservative criticism of an interventionist national security culture or liberal censure of specifically military belligerence—are basically critiques of harmful historical and institutional influences on senior strategists. In contrast to the centrality of strong personalities in the clash of titans narrative, the theme of mindless militarization, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, directs the critical gaze away from the “charismatic ideology of creation” toward the central social and historical question of “who has created this ‘creator.’”⁶⁵

These analyses provide important correctives to shallow journalistic interpretations of the review. As later chapters will show, dominant strains of

⁶¹ Spiegel and Weisman (2009).

⁶² Alter (2010), 370.

⁶³ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 254.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 279. For Goldstein’s lessons from Vietnam relating to the president and politics, see Goldstein (2008), Lessons 1, 3 and 4.

⁶⁵ Bourdieu (trans. 1996), 167.

discourse, derived from various aspects of US national security culture, did play a significant role in shaping the public debate on Afghanistan. However, the claim that the strategy review's outcome was in some way predetermined can be justified only as a rhetorical excess intended to make a necessary point about deeper currents in US policy.

Arguing that structure *alone* determined Obama's decision dismisses the notion of choice implicit in the strategy review. To accept the structural thesis without qualifications is to see critical reflection on strategy as doomed before it has begun—as either posturing by hapless politicians unable to control the military or as democratic decoration on the common imperial aspirations of Washington's policy elite. Although the limits of presidential power and the preferences of national security insiders were significant factors during the review, neither guaranteed a choice to escalate.

The assumption that the Pentagon inevitably would prevail over the president undervalues the influence of White House officials during the strategy review. Central Intelligence Agency director and political veteran Leon Panetta may have argued, as Woodward reports, that a Democratic president could not “go against military advice, especially if he asked for it.”⁶⁶ But administration officials did not toe the military line in all respects. “I have campaigned on providing Afghanistan with more troops, but I haven't made the decision yet,” Obama tells his team early in Woodward's account. “When we send them, we need to announce it in the context of a broader strategy.”⁶⁷ This broader strategy was designed, officials told Woodward, to “reorient U.S. foreign policy and the approach to terrorism” so that the military was “a piece of our national

⁶⁶ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 247.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

security but not the overwhelming driver of how we achieve our goals.”⁶⁸ Later, Obama reportedly told his staff that he needed to balance an “open-ended, perpetual commitment of force in Afghanistan” that “is wrong for our broader interests” with the risks of encouraging Afghan dependency, government corruption, and insurgent resistance.⁶⁹

These observations, if true, dispel the idea that the president and other key players lacked awareness of the perils of a militarized strategy. And it was not just Obama and Vice President Joseph R. Biden, both life-long civilians, who challenged military assumptions in public or private. The retired and active-duty generals, Jones and Lute, along with the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General James E. Cartwright, spoke out against an escalation, even if they could not recommend viable strategic alternatives.⁷⁰ As a result of this pushback from those officials with and without military experience, Thomas E. Donilon, Obama’s deputy national security adviser during the review period, told Woodward that the strategy review was “one of the rare examples in recent American history where a president had fully understood the contours of a national security decision,” and that the president had used the opportunity as “an assertion of presidential and civilian control of the military.”⁷¹ Rejecting the Vietnam analogy, Obama concluded that “a lot of the political frames through which these debates are being viewed don’t really connect with me generationally. I’m neither intimidated by our military, nor am I thinking that they’re somehow trying to undermine my role as commander in chief.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 280.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 237.

⁷¹ Ibid., 316 and 343.

⁷² Ibid., 377.

The White House's actions reinforced this rhetorical distance from a position that mindlessly accepted or rejected military expertise. Obama did agree during his first month in office to deploy 17,000 more soldiers and Marines in advance of Afghanistan's presidential election, but he resisted pressure to make another decision he inherited from Bush—General David D. McKiernan's 2009 request for an additional 30,000 military personnel—until after the election.⁷³ Far from deferring to his field commanders, he relieved two of them in two years: McKiernan for perceptions of incompetence and McChrystal for perceptions of insubordination.⁷⁴ Obama also rejected the military's presumed preferences by establishing a cap on troop increases and a rough timeline for US withdrawal.

If the strategy review was at best a qualified triumph for the military's presumed position in the debate, it also was something more than a pageant of sham choices hiding the national security state's irresistible determination to escalate. In Woodward's account, no one involved in the strategy review questioned the assumption that the United States had to keep forces in Afghanistan.⁷⁵ Yet beyond that important supposition, the administration did not appear to perceive that any course of action was backed by the sort of Washington consensus that Bacevich describes. Obama judged that the "easy thing for me to do—politically—would actually be to say no" to the 30,000-troop increase.⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid., 114.

⁷⁴ Chandrasekaran, "Pentagon Worries Led to Command Change" (2009). Wolfe (2010), 280.

⁷⁵ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 166, 186 and 228.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 303.

If he was thinking about his political base at the time, the president was surely right. Sixty percent of Democratic voters supported troop *reductions* by the end of 2009, and leading congressional Democrats such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senators Carl M. Levin, John F. Kerry, and Russell Feingold were skeptical of the benefits of escalation.⁷⁷ On the other hand, McCain and fellow Senators Lindsey Graham and Joseph I. Lieberman were urging the president as early as September to “commit the decisive military force necessary to prevail.”⁷⁸ A month later, former vice president Richard B. Cheney told the conservative Center for Security Policy that the “White House must stop dithering while America’s armed forces are in danger. It’s time for President Obama to do what it takes to win a war he has repeatedly and rightly called a war of necessity.”⁷⁹ By November, 63 percent of Republicans and 43 percent of independent voters supported increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan.⁸⁰

“The politics of taking our time to make a decision are absolutely fine,” observed David Axelrod, Obama’s senior adviser. “But the problem is we have to make a decision” about escalation, and based on the political landscape “any decision we make is going to be difficult.”⁸¹ Whereas elite consensus and public apathy would have favored a quick decision to avoid political sniping from both sides, it seems the president was willing to delay his decision precisely because there was no clear choice.

As a diagnosis of current and future problems with US strategy, mindless militarization’s greatest weakness is that it raises practical obstacles to a cure.

⁷⁷ Jones, “Americans Split on Afghanistan Troop Increase vs. Decrease” (2009). Shear and Kane, “President vs. party on troop increase” (2009).

⁷⁸ McCain, Graham, and Lieberman (2009).

⁷⁹ Associated Press, “Cheney: Stop ‘dithering’ over Afghanistan” (2009).

⁸⁰ Jones, “Americans Split on Afghanistan Troop Increase vs. Decrease” (2009).

⁸¹ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 247.

In *Washington Rules*, Bacevich recommends a national security agenda likely to be endorsed by critics of American imperialism across the political spectrum: use the military only “to defend the United States and its most vital interests,” which means in part that “the primary duty station of the American soldier is in America” and “the United States should employ force only as a last resort and only in self-defense.”⁸²

This implies a robust critical debate about the thresholds that define vital interests and the last resort of self-defense, but those who take the long view of American militarization insist that the problem goes deeper than mere talk. “The Washington consensus persists in considerable measure because it conforms to and reinforces widely accepted, if highly problematic, aspects of American civic culture,” Bacevich writes.⁸³ The United States can heal itself only by righting “contemporary America’s impoverished and attenuated conception of citizenship. That conception privileges individual choice above collective responsibility and immediate gratification over long-term well-being.”⁸⁴ Americans need “to define national defense as a collective responsibility” and “demand that the state operate on a pay-as-you-go basis.”⁸⁵

This may be an enlightened vision of civic and strategic renewal, but it also proposes to reverse habits of mind that have solidified over decades of US foreign policy. If better strategy depends on a transformation of the American polity or its calcified bureaucracy, change may be a long time coming. Agents who would resist strategy’s propensity for militarization—or at least improve the nation’s ability to pursue nonmilitary courses of action—would be wise to

⁸² Bacevich, *Washington Rules* (2010), 239.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

encourage modest changes favoring a more legitimate strategy process while hoping for the radical changes associated with a more legitimate social system.

The Case for Critical Discourse. Rather than considering the 2009 strategy review as a clash of titans or the fruit of mindless militarization, it is possible to regard the period as an attempt at critical discourse. This approach does not suggest that private or public discussions of the strategy were exceptionally thorough or substantive. It does not imply that the debate was free of personal animosity, or that actors did not interpret events and contemplate their moves through the lens of personal or institutional rivalry. It does not reject the dominance of certain dysfunctional ways of thinking and talking about national security.

What analyzing US strategy as critical discourse *does* require is a moderate suspension of cynicism: a willingness to believe that individual egos, institutional agendas, and the mixed legacy of American adventures abroad could be part of a process that alternately tried to gratify, frustrate, reconcile, and transcend these influences in the search for a more legitimate strategy in Afghanistan. Administration officials may have failed to improve the strategy, but they were not blind to the fact that it was deficient. They therefore attempted to use discourse to improve their approach or at least to determine that there were no better alternatives—primarily for their own satisfaction, but also for the broader acceptance of the strategy by other domestic and international elites and the general public.

It is plausible that US officials were motivated toward critical discourse because their circumstances mirrored those used to define the concept in the previous chapter. Public and elite opinion on the proper course in Afghanistan,

even though it appeared to reject immediate withdrawal in the first few months after Obama's inauguration, was nevertheless divided on the specifics of continued engagement. As a new executive with comparatively weak foreign policy credentials, an ambitious domestic agenda, and few good choices in Afghanistan, it would be reasonable for Obama and his closest advisers to feel the need to sort through their values and interests in a deliberate fashion, in order to determine whether or how the president could fulfill his campaign promise to make the fight against al Qaeda a higher national priority. Military and civilian officials, many of whom had been held over from the Bush administration, clearly needed to assess how their own preferences aligned with those of a very different leader who wanted to end the war in Iraq and close the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, but also had pledged to do more in Afghanistan. The change of administration thus raised fundamental questions about appropriateness, consequence, and authority that could be addressed through critical discourse on national security policy in the form of a strategy review.

It is also reasonably clear from public and private statements that 2009 was not simply a theoretical opportunity for critical discourse. Key participants consistently described the strategy review that way. As the rationale behind the review was described to Alter:

Obama established a methodical process: first the policymakers develop a strategy, then they assessed the resources necessary to implement the strategy, and finally they discussed how to get out. The president later said his "logic chain" was meant to avoid making decisions based on faulty premises. He insisted on

“testing all of the assumptions” before sending more soldiers to risk their lives.⁸⁶

In response to a question about Biden’s role in the strategy review, Obama told Woodward, “the American people are best served and our troops are best served by a vigorous debate on these kinds of life-or-death issues. I wanted every argument on every side to be poked hard.”⁸⁷ However much that poking may have led to suspicions and divisions between the White House and the Pentagon, at some level officials on all sides described themselves as engaged in what Benjamin Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser for strategic communication, called “a process of evaluating how these military resources are one piece of a broader strategy.”⁸⁸

The Pentagon echoed the White House’s sentiments on the value of deliberation. Tempering calls for the urgent deployment of two brigades in February 2009 in order to have an effect on local security before Afghan elections, Gates told reporters that this “is the first time that this president has been asked to deploy large numbers of troops overseas,” and “it seems to me a thoughtful and deliberative approach to that decision is entirely appropriate.”⁸⁹ Discussing the Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy with the press corps in March, Michèle Flournoy, the undersecretary of defense for policy, said the administration was “committed to a regular process of reassessment and evaluation of this mission.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Alter (2010), 273.

⁸⁷ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 160.

⁸⁸ Wolffe (2010), 240.

⁸⁹ Cooper, “Obama Weighs Adding Troops in Afghanistan as Overall Strategy Waits” (2009).

⁹⁰ Riedel, Holbrooke, and Flournoy (2009).

The idea that officials' first responsibility was to treat the strategy with a critical eye remained a constant refrain, even as military pressure on the president was ostensibly increasing later in the year. Petraeus told attendees at a Marine Corps COIN conference in September that the strategy's assumptions had to be revisited, since the Afghan election looked "like it may not produce a government with greater legitimacy in the eyes of the people."⁹¹ In his October speech in London that media described as a rejection of more limited options being considered by the president, McChrystal told a reporter that the "process of going through a very detailed, policy-level debate, is incredibly important and incredibly healthy. The president led that very effectively, and so I think this is a very necessary process to go through so we come to a clear decision and then move forward."⁹²

On the political side, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters that what "Vice President Cheney calls dithering, President Obama calls his solemn responsibility to the men and women in uniform and to the American public," a theme that Obama reiterated in several subsequent public appearances and press events.⁹³ "The president is asking the questions that have never been asked on the civilian side, the political side, the military side, and the strategic side," White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel told CNN.⁹⁴

Each of these statements can be dismissed as a bid for the rhetorical high ground against policy opponents, but it is also possible that each party in

⁹¹ Ackerman, "Counterinsurgents Grapple With Next Afghanistan Moves" (2009).

⁹² McChrystal, "Special Address" (2009).

⁹³ Loven and Gearan (2009). For similar remarks by Obama, see Zeleny, "No Rushing on Decisions, Obama Says" (2009), and Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama of Japan in Joint Press Conference at Kantei, Tokyo, Japan" (November 2009).

⁹⁴ Stewart (2009).

the debate could see *itself* as intending to promote critical discourse for the reasons cited above, while seeing others as engaged in more cynical manipulations of the process.⁹⁵ Even with a more complete historical record than scholars currently possess, it would be almost impossible to distinguish actors who were defending the strategy review as a critical approach on rational, procedural grounds from actors using this justification instrumentally. More to the point, tracing every profession of principle to selfish motives serves only to reinforce the true but otherwise unhelpful observation that leaders too seldom live up to the ideals of their office. The *process* of making strategy, on the other hand, can be judged with greater confidence and to greater effect. Viewed in this light, the legitimacy of US strategy in Afghanistan during the first year of the Obama presidency—the most decisive period for the policy since September 2001—depended on practical steps to establish the validity and equity of discourse about the future direction of strategy.

Strategy Review as Process: The Limits of Government Discourse as Usual

Explaining the strategy review as critical discourse requires explaining the point on which most critics of the process agree: the review failed to operate as advertised. It was by most accounts a failed example of critical discourse in the sense that it did not address the most fundamental concerns about the ends and means of US efforts in Afghanistan. Nor did it expand elite ownership of the strategy, considering that divisions over the strategy, despite some ups and downs, generally worsened over time. Before considering this point, it is

⁹⁵ Jervis (1976), 120-122 and 326-329.

important to qualify it by observing that critics often do not give the strategy review due credit for helping to advance the administration's thinking. In Woodward's account, for example, Obama poses several questions following the submission of McChrystal's initial assessment at the end of August 2009:

Can al Qaeda be defeated and how? Do you need to defeat the Taliban to defeat al Qaeda? Can a counterinsurgency strategy be effective in Afghanistan given the capacities of the Afghan government? What can we realistically expect to achieve in the next few years? What presence do we have to have in Afghanistan in order to have an effective counterterrorism platform?⁹⁶

Woodward cites these questions—as well as the lack of any substantive response—as evidence that the administration was essentially treading water during its deliberations. Although each of these questions may seem like a step backward in a strategy that had been announced to the world in March, they do not retrace the strategy's footsteps as much as send it marching in a previously neglected and much more difficult direction.

Between his candidacy and the second month of his presidency, Obama's thoughts about the purpose of the war and the problems he faced clearly evolved. Although the Taliban had been practically synonymous with al Qaeda in speeches during the campaign, the president now made distinctions. He admitted when unveiling his strategy on 27 March that “a return to Taliban rule would condemn” Afghans “to brutal governance, international isolation, a paralyzed economy, and the denial of basic human rights.”⁹⁷ But Obama now declared that his “greatest responsibility is to protect the American people” by helping Afghanistan fight “a common enemy” with “a clear and focused goal: to

⁹⁶ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 164.

⁹⁷ Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (March 2009). The other quotes in this paragraph are taken from this same speech.

disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” This would be accomplished through a military effort aimed at “training and increasing the size of Afghan security forces,” a civilian effort to “promote a more capable and accountable Afghan government,” and initiatives to make Pakistan “a stronger partner in destroying” insurgent “safe havens.” There was “an uncompromising core of the Taliban” that “must be defeated,” but others deserved “the option to choose a different course” through “a reconciliation process in every province.” All of these endeavors required “clear metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable.”

As of March, therefore, the portion of the strategy review chaired by Bruce Riedel—a scholar at the Brookings Institution and former CIA and NSC official—had redefined *what* Obama wanted to do in Afghanistan: focus on al Qaeda, hand off responsibility to the Afghans, get better cooperation from Pakistan, and track developments on all fronts. In the second phase of the review—touched off by the assessment McChrystal was tasked to prepare 60 days after replacing McKiernan as the senior US and NATO commander in Afghanistan in June—the administration addressed *how* it intended to achieve objectives in light of multiple obstacles.

This new direction in the discourse rested on the logic of consequence, which in turn required considerable speculation. For example, Woodward recounts a 9 October 2009 meeting of Obama’s team in which Gates addressed the practical balance between killing and talking to insurgents. “Any final strategic plan should deny the Taliban the ability to occupy and control territory,” Gates proposed, “but facilitate the reintegration of the Taliban with

the government and improve governance.”⁹⁸ Biden rejoined by asking whether either escalated military operations against insurgents or negotiations with them would work if the Afghan government remained “a criminal syndicate a year from now.”⁹⁹ Here and elsewhere, the strategy review weighed possible positive and negative outcomes in an effort to determine whether and how the administration could get from where it was to where it wanted to be. This was a discussion that employed the language of tactics, resources, risks, and timelines.

What was bypassed in discourse about what the administration wanted to do and how it wanted to do it was a detailed discussion of *why* those ends were necessary or desirable in relation to competing interests and values. By focusing on consequence, officials largely tabled questions of appropriateness. Of course, Obama did address the importance of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda through actions in Afghanistan—the strategic *why* attached to the *what*—in his major public statements about the strategy in 2009. “Al Qaeda and its allies—the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks—are in Pakistan and Afghanistan,” the president said in March. “And if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban—or allows al Qaeda to go unchallenged—that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can.”¹⁰⁰ Announcing in December his decision to send an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan, Obama said he was “convinced that our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda. It is from here that

⁹⁸ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 219-20.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁰ Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (March 2009).

we were attacked on 9/11, and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak.”¹⁰¹

These statements were powerful evocations of the threat to Americans, but they did not explain why the president’s strategy—a stronger offense in Afghanistan—was better than possible alternatives—such as stronger defense in the United States. Nor did the words go very far in justifying why the magnitude of the current or future threat was worth the considerable cost of the strategy in terms of American lives or the nation’s shrinking economic resources.

For many political connoisseurs who shaped media coverage of the review, there was a simple explanation for the short shrift given to questions of appropriateness: no one who mattered was asking those questions. In what was billed as a debate on the review, for instance, the panel on one broadcast of ABC’s *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* consisted of three Washington insiders supporting a surge—Senators Dianne Feinstein and Saxby Chambliss, and retired General Jack Keane—and one, Representative Jim McGovern, who wanted prior assurance of a “clearly defined mission, and that means a beginning, a middle, a transition period, and an end.”¹⁰² Since McGovern at the time was considered to be one of the more liberal members of Congress, the apparent boundaries of the debate were not those of hawks and doves but those of hawks who supported escalation and moderates who sought plans for more limited engagement leading to responsible disentanglement.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (December 2009).

¹⁰² Stephanopoulos (2009).

¹⁰³ McGovern’s political reputation is taken from the profile in Koszczuk and Angle, eds., *CQ’s Politics in America* (2008).

This same point was underscored in an October 2009 *Newsweek* profile of Biden—the administration’s highest-ranking skeptic—which concluded that the vice president “has been incorrectly characterized as a dove who wants to pull out of Afghanistan. In fact ... he wants to maintain a large troop presence,” but with greater emphasis on training Afghan security forces, negotiating with the Taliban, and devoting more effort toward Pakistan.¹⁰⁴ The space for elite negotiation, therefore, was one in which some courses of action could be assumed away, as when policy makers reassured themselves that no one was seriously discussing leaving Afghanistan.¹⁰⁵

The idea that elite consensus narrowed the scope of the debate implies certain assumptions about the officials involved in the strategy review and the political and military elites whose support they required. To start from a position of consensus on a narrower range of possible actions than their critics could envision, senior government figures should have believed they had good information that restricted the parameters of their decision: the severity of the threat posed by al Qaeda, the centrality of Afghanistan to US interests, the political support for *not* withdrawing, and so on. Alter, for example, traces Obama’s reluctance to consider withdrawal to the influence of “threat charts” linking terrorist plots to suspects’ travel to the border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁶

Aside from this shared confidence in relevant facts, the conclusion that influential policy makers overwhelmingly favored military options suggests that officials maintained a consistent, calculating state of mind that gravitated

¹⁰⁴ Bailey (2009).

¹⁰⁵ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 186, 205, and 354.

¹⁰⁶ Alter (2010), 374.

toward sustained if not expanded intervention. As a broad description of national security elites, these assumptions may pertain as a general rule. Surveys of US policy makers, for example, have demonstrated that they are better informed than the general public and favor expanding America's international involvement more than average citizens whose policy beliefs they otherwise reflect.¹⁰⁷ But in the case of US strategy in Afghanistan, officials appeared uncomfortable with the idea that they could bound the discussion safely within the limits of their existing information and the preferences of an elite majority espousing the hawkish bipartisan position of elites like Feinstein, Chambliss, and Keane.

In particular, several policy makers seemed willing to challenge assumptions and extend the review specifically because they understood that general agreement about the appropriateness of continuing the war did not extend far outside policy circles. Biden left his tour of Afghanistan as vice president-elect with the impression that US forces had no single answer to the question "What are we trying to do here?"—although the most common answer was "I don't know."¹⁰⁸ In the midst of the review, Woodward argues that Jones, Gates, and Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton realized the need for greater public discourse about the appropriateness of the war, even while resisting important aspects of the topic in their own conversation:

The sessions so far had exposed a simple fact: They had not found a way to articulate why the United States was in Afghanistan. What were America's interests? They had to find a better way to explain. It was not entirely a public relations gloss they needed, but that was part of it. The initial cause of the war was crystal-clear—retaliation for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks

¹⁰⁷ Holsti (2006), 77 and 296.

¹⁰⁸ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 71.

and the successful effort to deny al Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan. But the war had ambled along somewhat aimlessly, under-resourced for eight years....

All three admitted that they were being dragged down with terms like counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. The public didn't understand what those words meant. There were too many labels. They also agreed that McChrystal's mission had to be reframed with realistic goals and time limits. They also skirted the troubling question: What precisely were they trying to do?¹⁰⁹

In his West Point address, Obama voiced a similar awareness of public and elite doubts when he affirmed his convictions that "we must exercise restraint in the use of military force," that "debate over Iraq and terrorism have left our unity on national security issues in tatters," that most Americans were "focused on rebuilding our economy and putting people to work," and that those who fought paid "the terrible wages of war."¹¹⁰

The president then went on to reiterate the threat posed by al Qaeda and outline his strategy. Returning to concerns about the war, he raised and responded to three arguments against the strategy: that "Afghanistan is another Vietnam," that the United States should "go forward with the troops that we already have," and that military operations should avoid "a time frame for our transition to Afghan responsibility."¹¹¹ The last two were arguments of consequence derived from 11 months of wrangling over the details of personnel, costs, and timelines. The comparison with Vietnam came closer to an argument against the strategy's appropriateness, but it was formulated as a straw man, easily dismissed by noting the differences between unique historical cases.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 207-208.

¹¹⁰ Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (December 2009).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Critics of the strategy review on the right and left, however, had asked questions that were more troubling than those the president chose to answer in his address. “If Afghanistan were a war of necessity,” as Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, noted in an August 2009 issue of the *New York Times*, “it would justify any level of effort. It is not and does not.”¹¹² Although Haass expressed qualified support for the president’s emerging strategy, others questioned its wisdom. For example, the terrorism expert Marc Sageman observed that fewer than one-quarter of all terrorist attacks in the previous 20 years resulted in casualties, and only two of those had been perpetrated by al Qaeda—numbers that called into question whether the network’s eradication in Afghanistan was potentially worth thousands of American lives and billions of dollars.¹¹³

Commentators favoring withdrawal argued that American interests in the region were too narrow to justify the risks, costs, and damage to national values associated with prolonging the war. Others observed that the focus on Afghanistan was too limited given al Qaeda’s stronger position outside the country and the fact that preventing future terrorist attacks depended on more than America’s decision to fight on in Afghanistan.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the president’s focus on the Afghanistan-Pakistan region if not the al Qaeda network would be challenged less than a month after his appearance at West Point, when a botched attempt to set off an explosive concealed in the underwear of a passenger on an Amsterdam-to-Detroit flight was traced to an al Qaeda affiliate

¹¹² Haass, “In Afghanistan, the Choice Is Ours” (2009).

¹¹³ Sageman (2009).

¹¹⁴ For samples circulating in academic journals during the review period in addition to the representative media commentaries already cited, see Boyd, Dunn, and Scouras (2009), and Simon and Stevenson (2009), 49.

in Yemen.¹¹⁵ Reviewing Woodward's chronicle of the strategy review, Bacevich vented the frustration of those who felt, toward the end of Obama's second year in office, that critical discourse on the strategy had failed to answer why continued conflict was necessary:

Why fight a war that even the general in charge says can't be won? What will the perpetuation of this conflict cost? Who will it benefit? Does the ostensibly most powerful nation in the world have no choice but to wage permanent war? Are there no alternatives? Can Obama shut down an unwinnable war now about to enter its tenth year? Or is he—along with the rest of us—a prisoner of war?¹¹⁶

The standard explanation for why policy makers avoid big questions is that they walk through decisions wearing blinders. They are programmed by psychology, ideology, or culture to see things from a certain perspective: to protect their own interests, to assume the worst or hope for the best, to shield themselves from dissent, to seek simple solutions to complex problems. In the case of the strategy review, though, Obama's team showed an awareness of these tendencies, as well as the roles they might play within the framework of the US constitution to counter them. From the public record as it now stands, the White House appeared determined to place military options in a larger context. Biden, Eikenberry, and members of the NSC challenged McChrystal's assessment, presumably because it risked narrowing the discussion to his own mandate to improve security in Afghanistan at the expense of fuller consideration of the role of Pakistan or Kabul's discredited central government. The Pentagon—remembering the disaster caused by political pressure for a light

¹¹⁵ BBC News, "Al-Qaeda wing claims Christmas Day US flight bomb plot" (December 2009).

¹¹⁶ Bacevich, "Prisoners of War: Bob Woodward and All the President's Men (2010 Edition)" (2010).

footprint in Iraq—seems to have approached the review in the spirit of providing sound military advice, rather than quickly compromising with naysayers to hand the White House an easy decision.¹¹⁷ Everyone seemed to agree that any strategic choice would be unpopular and precarious after eight years of war in a deflated economy. For this reason, they proclaimed it their duty to carefully consider and continuously evaluate the decision. Then they largely failed to follow through on that pledge.

The gaps between the government's collective awareness, rhetoric, and behavior during the Afghanistan strategy review surely included failures among American leaders and institutions, however well-intentioned. Although the spirit of democracy at times seemed willing, the flesh was weak. The observation that US strategy will improve when the nation succeeds in transforming human nature, national culture, or its major institutions, however, provides cold comfort for the future. A decade from now, the United States is unlikely to have politicians, generals, or agencies remarkably better than—as opposed to noticeably different from—the ones the nation had in 2009. But by considering the review as a discursive process, it is reasonably clear that the strategy suffered from a traditional approach to official deliberation that can be changed more easily than human nature or organizational culture. Specifically, the process failed to concede inevitable lapses in validity and sacrificed equity for the appearance of unity.

The Quest for Certainty. The first trouble for the strategy review was the regularity with which discourse returned to the logic of consequence. In 1957's *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, a young Henry Kissinger discussed

¹¹⁷ Alter (2010), 369.

what he called the empiricism of US policy. His observations merit quotation at length because of their continued relevance in relation to the dominance of consequentialist discourse on national security issues:

Foremost among the attitudes which affect the making of our policy is American empiricism and its quest for certainty: nothing is “true” unless it is “objective,” and it is not “objective” unless it is part of experience. This makes for the absence of dogmatism and the ease of social relations. But it has pernicious consequences in the conduct of policy. Policy is the art of weighing probabilities; mastery of it lies in grasping the nuances of possibilities. To attempt to conduct it as a science must lead to rigidity. For only the risks are certain; the opportunities are conjectural. One cannot be “sure” about the implications of events until they have happened, and when they have occurred it is too late to do anything about them. Empiricism in foreign policy leads to a penchant for *ad hoc* solutions. The rejection of dogmatism inclines our policy makers to postpone committing themselves until all the facts are in; but by the time the facts are in, a crisis has usually developed or an opportunity has passed. Our policy is, therefore, geared to dealing with emergencies; it finds difficulty in developing the long-range program that might forestall them.

A symptom of our search for certainty is the vast number of committees charged with examining and developing policy. The very multiplicity of committees makes it difficult to arrive at decisions in time. It tends to give a disproportionate influence to subordinate officials who prepare the initial memoranda and it overwhelms our higher officials with trivia. Because of our cult of specialization, sovereign departments negotiate national policy among themselves with no single authority, except an overburdened President, able to take an over-all view or apply decisions over a period of time. This results in the gap previously noted between grand strategy and particular tactics, between the definition of general objectives so vague as to be truistic and the concern with immediate problems. The gap is bridged only when a crisis forces the bureaucratic machinery into accelerated action, and then the top leadership has little choice but to concur in the administrative proposals. In short, we try to cope with political problems by administrative means.¹¹⁸

Kissinger’s analysis of the Cold War cannot be applied wholesale to the problems within the Afghanistan strategy review. Kissinger sought stability

¹¹⁸ Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1969 ed.), 240-241.

from a big idea for confronting a global Soviet threat—a prospect that becomes more difficult for the multiple threats posed today by potential adversaries in the varied contexts of failed states and regional conflicts. He also was clearly disposed to prevent the bureaucratic rabble from muddling the deep thinking of policy elites—a vision that presumes rather than proves that the *crème de la crème*, faced with a steady string of complex decisions and government-wide strategies, would be better able to interpret the national interest and direct fractious agencies to pursue it without being as overburdened as the president. Nevertheless, the dysfunctional empiricism described by Kissinger emerged as a major point of failure in official discourse on Afghanistan in 2009. Discussions drifted toward arguments of consequence as officials abandoned unsettled principles for uncertain practicalities. The result was a lack of clear connections between ongoing tactics and the strategy ostensibly guiding them.

Recounting a discussion he had as a presidential candidate with Petraeus as the senior commander in Iraq, Obama provides Woodward with this perspective on civil-military relations:

My job, if I have the honor of being commander in chief, is going to be to look at the whole picture. I expect you, as the commander of our forces in Iraq, to ask for everything you need and more to ensure your success. That's what you owe the troops who are under your command. My job, then, which in some ways is more difficult, is I've got to choose. Because I don't have infinite resources.¹¹⁹

There is obviously a long distance between requesting support and choosing a strategy, and it cannot be covered exclusively by meting out resources.

¹¹⁹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 14.

Apportionment makes sense only when informed by a legitimate understanding of the criteria for resource decisions that favor one interest over another.

Determining the appropriate level of material support for US efforts in Afghanistan—tactical details about how many people, positioned where, doing what, for how long—presupposes the solution of higher-order questions. For example, how important is the stability of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the United States? Should national policy value killing violent actors more or less than addressing the root causes of future violence, and to what extent are those goals mutually exclusive? What level of force is required to make less coercive options feasible and effective? Can the agencies or allies who will receive additional resources be trusted to use them wisely? As discussed in the previous chapter, there are no definitive answers to these questions, but a strategy's legitimacy derives from discourse that resolves them at least to the point that tentative answers can be employed as good working assumptions. In this way, strategy poses what Kissinger calls political problems. Strategy hinges on position issues that require leaders to make choices among a host of competing interests and values, while convincing others of the rightness of those choices.

In the case of US strategy in Afghanistan in 2009, Obama's team—like Kissinger's early cold warriors—more often than not coped with political problems through administrative means. A taboo against mixing political and policy questions influenced the substance of the review, according to Alter:

Like other presidents, Obama believed it was wrong to bring up politics in the [Situation] Room. So one of the critical factors in his eventual decision—the level of American public support required to sustain a major commitment—was left unspoken. The need for public backing for any war was one of the most important

lessons taught at the Army War College, but no one from the Pentagon wanted to talk about it.¹²⁰

This compartmentalization of politics and strategy combined with bureaucratic specialization to ensure that Obama's more knowledgeable advisers could consider gaps as someone else's problem. For example, when Biden argues in Woodward's account that the strategy the president would unveil in March is not "politically sustainable," Riedel responds by declaring politics outside his purview—a point Obama concedes.¹²¹

But how useful is a potential strategy that fails to account for its own political legitimacy? McChrystal's August 2009 assessment simply lists as risks those elements beyond his writ to address, including "loss of coalition political will, insufficient ability and political will on [the Afghan government's] part to win the support of its people and to control its territory, failure to provide effective civilian capabilities by ISAF's partners, significant improvements or adaptations by insurgent groups, and actions of external actors such as Pakistan and Iran."¹²² The assessment hedges the importance of what other US officials must do with respect to Pakistan to improve McChrystal's own prospects in Afghanistan:

Stability in Pakistan is essential, not only in its own right, but also to enable progress in Afghanistan. While the existence of safe havens in Pakistan does not guarantee ISAF failure, Afghanistan does require Pakistani cooperation and action against violent militancy, particularly against those groups active in Afghanistan.

¹²⁰ Alter (2010), 376.

¹²¹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 108.

¹²² McChrystal, "Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Subject: COMISAF's initial assessment" (2009), 2-22.

Nonetheless, the insurgency in Afghanistan is predominantly Afghan.¹²³

Under the ethos of separating military advice from political considerations, McChrystal's relatively narrow delimitation of his mission can be considered an inherent virtue of a professionalized military approach to strategy. Given the administration's subsequent wrestling over decidedly non-military factors like the worthiness of its Afghan and Pakistani allies, however, circumscribing strategy in this fashion comes to seem more like an imposed vice.

Inevitably, the more US officials deferred political concerns in the interest of producing a purely rational strategy, the more they ensured that they would be dissatisfied with the result. Yet the administration's response to this frustration was to skirt the uncertainties of interests and values by continuing to steer discourse down more familiar logical, rhetorical, and bureaucratic paths. Each method of discursive diversion reflected a common quest to improve the strategy not by arguing its appropriateness but by structuring discussions and decisions in ways that sought greater certainty of the strategy's consequences where there was none to be found.

The most extreme outcome of this tendency was simply to assert certainty rather than try to find it. By framing the strategy's position issues as valence issues, elites could dismiss the contentiousness of strategic decisions by pretending that there was no choice. In some cases, choices were cast as a simple matter of victory or defeat. "There's only one option the president should consider," McCain reportedly told McChrystal in reference to pending troop

¹²³ Ibid., 2-10 and 2-11.

requests, “and that’s the winning option.”¹²⁴ Administration officials channeled a similar sentiment when rejecting their least preferred options—usually an accelerated withdrawal—by equating those options with failure.

The inverse of framing choices to escalate in terms of victory involved characterizing more limited options as the inevitable result of deference to representative government. Thus Woodward reports the conclusion of Colonel Derek Harvey, director of Central Command’s Afghanistan-Pakistan Center for Excellence, that “Afghanistan is doable” but “not sellable.”¹²⁵ Obama instructed his advisers that he had “two years with the public” on Afghanistan, and a timetable for withdrawal would be a requirement that “will come from the Hill.”¹²⁶ Biden and Jones, in Woodward’s account, both focused on the strategy’s potential short-term effectiveness as the primary measure of its viability: what could be done in a year to demonstrate progress?¹²⁷

All of these arguments are delivered as realistic assessments of the need to restrict choices in the interest of political legitimacy over the remainder of Obama’s term. Coming as they did before any definite trend in support for what was already America’s longest war, however, what passed as definitive conclusions about the limits of political will were largely conjectural. Presidents Richard Nixon and George W. Bush were able to extend operations in Vietnam and Iraq by insisting they were pursuing a valid new strategy, although each man’s reputation paid a heavy political price for his style of wartime leadership. An interesting counterfactual question is whether Obama could have done better—escalating operations *and* sustaining greater support for them through

¹²⁴ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 155.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 110 and 232.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 221 and 239.

the 2012 elections—if officials had crafted a strategy that adequately addressed concerns about the appropriateness of continued action in Afghanistan.

Aside from these assumptions about the strategic certainty of outcomes or the political certainty of limited public support, the most prevalent method for trying to improve the president’s comfort with the strategy was to ask a lot of questions about its consequences. “Obama’s style,” according to the *Washington Post*’s reckoning from interviews with more than a dozen administration sources, “was to lead the meetings through questions.”¹²⁸ Later accounts also confirm that Obama was determined to get “down in the weeds” by “requesting precise accountability metrics” and probing “one or two elements of what he considered the weakest parts of the reports” put before him.¹²⁹

Executive sessions therefore tended to generate more questions than they answered. “The Pentagon and State Department assigned hundreds of people to answer all the group’s questions,” Alter says, “only to find that at each meeting the president and his advisers had even more.”¹³⁰ In particular, the president “privately encouraged the vice president to play the bad cop,” with both men working “in tandem to send the brass back to the Pentagon again and again to fashion better plans.”¹³¹ By contemporary accounts, Biden often tried to fulfill this task by attacking assumptions with speculation—evaluating options strictly in terms of extending current facts or assumed risks into the future. During one meeting reconstructed by Woodward, the vice president declared “the premise of the counterinsurgency strategy is flawed. There’s a

¹²⁸ Kornblutt, Wilson, and DeYoung, “Obama pressed for faster surge” (2009).

¹²⁹ Alter (2010), 373 and 375. Wolffe (2010), 239.

¹³⁰ Alter (2010), 374.

¹³¹ Alter (2010), 383. This interpretation is also supported by Obama’s comments to Woodward on the vice president’s role; see Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 160.

balloon effect. We squeeze it, and it pops out somewhere else.”¹³² He told the president in the same session, “If you don’t get Pakistan right, you can’t win.”¹³³ Biden continued to lay out hypothetical scenarios in a subsequent session. “If the [Afghan] government’s a criminal syndicate a year from now, how will troops make a difference?” he asked. “If a year from now there is no demonstrable progress in governance, what do we do?”¹³⁴

Of course, there is nothing wrong with testing assumptions against facts and likely developments in the interest of better planning, but criticism of one idea is not the same thing as a critical discourse that develops and evaluates multiple ideas. The limits of the administration’s approach are suggested by the following exchange between Lute and Petraeus in Woodward’s book:

“Sitting here,” Lute said to Petraeus, “this is how this looks. What am I missing? What makes you so cocksure that you can defy these kinds of risk factors and produce?”

Petraeus said they did not have to defy all those risk factors. Progress could take many forms. There was another risk—the battlefield. In Iraq it had been the most viable differential. Provide security and the other risks would be reduced. Violence would drop and the country would appear more stable. “All we have to do is begin to show progress,” Petraeus said, “and that’ll be sufficient to add time to the clock and we’ll get what we need.”

“That’s a dramatic misreading of the president,” Lute said. Obama hadn’t even uttered the word “counterinsurgency” in his speeches and opposed the idea of a long-term commitment. “I don’t think he’s into that.”¹³⁵

In this conversation, Lute appears stuck on the rather obvious certainty that escalation carries risks, whereas Petraeus has faith—as Kissinger insists all strategists must—in conjectural opportunities.

¹³² Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 166.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 338.

Through much of the review period, the concerns about the strategy voiced by Lute and others were predominantly quantitative, constraining, and oriented towards the near term. Official guidance took the form of what the strategy should *not* be: too long, too big, too expensive, too unpopular, too militarized, too Americanized, or too focused on Afghanistan.¹³⁶ Petraeus, on the other hand, imagines a bridge to the future in which qualitative changes have made present constraints less relevant. Proponents of a surge could and did argue that fighting insurgents would create the space needed for better Afghan-led security, governance, and economic development, which could make the strategy a surer bet rather than a greater liability over time.

A major problem with the review, therefore, was not just that administration officials were debating a chicken-or-egg question: which should come first, “more troops or better governance,” as Clinton is said to have framed it.¹³⁷ The administration deepened its quandary by adopting at least two fundamentally different approaches to answering that question. Skeptics pointed out the inevitable risks and costs of the surge’s strategic vision. Such skepticism was warranted, but from the visionary’s perspective it was an easier but less effective response than proposing an alternative vision that could achieve comparable or better benefits with fewer risks. In this regard, the military failed the administration by not providing more substantive alternatives to the eventual strategy.

At the same time, none of the other agencies participating in the review were able to offer persuasive options. The clearest counter-proposal was the

¹³⁶ For representative comments to this effect from Obama, Biden, Jones, and Eikenberry, see Alter (2010), 386-387, and Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 127 and 308-09.

¹³⁷ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 223.

“counterterrorism-plus” option promoted by the vice president, which had its detractors. Plenty of people argued during and after the review that the aggressive drone strikes and raids at the center of counterterrorism-plus—which had been the *de facto* American strategy in Pakistan—were “stoking anti-American attitudes” there and creating more potential terrorists angered by “unacceptable civilian casualties.”¹³⁸ Others countered that capture-or-kill operations required “control of territory by friendly, cooperative forces” that could “close the human intelligence gap” in targeting.¹³⁹ In other words, successful counterterrorism implied successful counterinsurgency.

Considering the review as a strategy-making process, however, the relevant question here is not whether Biden’s notion *could* have worked. The telling point is that the way policy makers talked about the strategy valued specificity and thus required viable strategic options to possess ever greater levels of detail as the discourse progressed. According to Alter, Biden’s proposal

... never got much traction because it didn’t cohere as a concrete proposal. He couldn’t say exactly how a counterterrorism strategy would actually work, perhaps because, unlike Dick Cheney when he was vice president, Biden did not have a large national security staff to prepare elaborate plans.¹⁴⁰

Once the review began heaping piles of facts on the Pentagon’s option, it became more difficult for any alternative—however appropriate in its broad outlines—to measure up.

¹³⁸ DeYoung, “Al-Qaeda Seen as Shaken in Pakistan” (2009). See also Kilcullen and Exum, “Death From Above, Outrage Down Below” (2009).

¹³⁹ Szrom (2010).

¹⁴⁰ Alter (2010), 383. For a contemporary assessment that the vice president’s proposal did not advance far in the administration’s discussions, see Bailey (2009).

Reviewing his role in the process for Alter, Obama recalled that a “lot of my questions had to do with the pace with which troops were arriving and the pace in which troops would be leaving.”¹⁴¹ Whatever rigor this added to the process, it also sanctioned bureaucrats to stay in their comfort zone. Options could be structured around marginal variations in the quantitative matters that concerned the president: 15,000 to 40,000 more troops, starting after the elections or later, operating in the population centers or more evenly spread throughout the country, withdrawing quickly or gradually in 2011 or beyond. Qualitatively different approaches to promoting US interests and values did not need to be a part of this conversation. The president “wanted the strategy to drive the number” of troops, as one anonymous adviser insisted, and Obama is said to have complained at one point that too many participants and observers “think that this is some kind of numbers game.”¹⁴² Choosing a strategy was certainly about more than numbers, but the available evidence suggests that too few policy makers—including the president—consistently discussed the choice as though it was.

Commenting on Biden’s advice to present the strategy to the military as a “direct presidential order that couldn’t be countermanded,” Alter says “Obama had already learned something about leaving no room for ambiguity with the military.”¹⁴³ Paradoxically, discourse intended to clarify the consequences of the strategy and the specifics of its implementation had the effect of increasing ambiguity about its appropriateness. As Woodward remarks in an editorial

¹⁴¹ Alter (2010), 384.

¹⁴² Kornblutt, Wilson, and DeYoung, “Obama pressed for faster surge” (2009). Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 305.

¹⁴³ Alter (2010), 389. For the text of the NSA term sheet that emerged from the president’s desire to clarify his decision, see Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 385-90.

aside after listing yet another internal argument that the strategy might not work, officials were “heavy on diagnosis but light on solutions.”¹⁴⁴ Discourse about known risks and costs could not verify whether the strategy under consideration would work, since success depended on actions that would change the present facts. What such discourse could confirm was that the one approach under serious consideration was both risky and costly. The drift toward arguments of consequence therefore fed suspicions that the strategy was bad without identifying any better course of action. This may have been an accurate reflection of the Obama administration’s options, but it challenged the notion that a legitimate strategy in Afghanistan could be based on an objective standard of validity.

The theoretical foundations for critical discourse previously discussed suggest that the 2009 strategy review could be expected to face problems with its validity. Small wars present the worst of both worlds in terms of subjective assessments of their appropriateness—which do not clearly tilt in one direction—and objective assessments of their potential consequences—which typically seem inflated in comparison to what can be only modest gains in volatile and economically downtrodden regions. It is therefore not surprising that US officials attempted to bolster the validity of the strategy before them with more objective information and analysis. But they may have been better served by spending more time judging the appropriateness and feasibility of several less developed but more strategically distinct proposals, such as Biden’s counterterrorism-plus option or a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

¹⁴⁴ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 227.

The Quest for Public Unity. Regardless of whether the Obama administration could have discussed its options in a way that made the president's eventual choice more self-evidently valid, elites outside Obama's cabinet could not be expected to accept the decision without discussion. They needed to be convinced. Whereas questions of pure validity arguably could be resolved by turning discourse inward—with a small number of senior officials evaluating their choices against information and opinions supplied by the government's vast network—the legitimacy of the final choice required turning discourse outward through more attention to equity.

In contrast to other policy decisions, such as those associated with foreign trade or domestic programs, military strategy often insists on a level of secrecy that limits the inclusiveness, transparency, and autonomy of the process. In the case of the Afghanistan strategy review, senior officials either could not enforce secrecy or—in the interest of testing external support for one or more options—chose to enforce it selectively. When imperfect secrecy indicated that the administration was wrestling with the strategy, the response was to limit equity further by plugging leaks and papering over disagreements with public expressions of unity for the president's decision. None of this was a noticeable departure from standard practice in Washington, but it did nothing to alleviate elite concerns about the strategy.

Before examining the equity of the strategy review in detail, it may be useful to consider an analogy that explains the distinction between public unity and ownership. Although the practice has become less common, Christian marriage ceremonies adapted from the Book of Common Prayer often included some form of the injunction, "if any man can shew any just cause, why they

may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace.”¹⁴⁵ In addition to providing a safeguard against the proceedings resulting in church-sanctioned polygamy or other illegal acts, the moment provided a semblance of unity. The congregation’s silence was a public affirmation of the justness of the union. Of course, congregants could refrain from objecting for reasons having nothing to do with their own information or judgment about the validity of the marriage, such as the desire to avoid public embarrassment. On the other hand, true *ownership* of the idea that the couple could and should enter an enduring commitment required procedural equity rather than a mere public affirmation of unity. To truly convince others that the marriage was a matter of choice and that the couple’s choice was made for good reasons, the bride and groom’s courtship and decision to wed had to feature a certain degree of inclusiveness and transparency to close family and friends.

In the interest of public unity, the strategy review sometimes exhibited a rhetorical brinksmanship akin to the Anglican marriage liturgy. “If people don’t think this realistically can be done in this time frame,” Obama told his advisers a little more than a week before the West Point speech, “they need to speak now.”¹⁴⁶ Two days prior to the address, Woodward reports that the president told Mullen, “I need you to tell me now whether you can accept this... If you can, then I expect your wholehearted support. And that includes what you say in public, to Congress, and internally to your own organizations.”¹⁴⁷ By leaving open one last chance for disagreement, these words effectively shut the door on

¹⁴⁵ From “The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” in Church of England (1981), 301-312.

¹⁴⁶ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 291.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 326.

future dissent. Objections could be raised only at the expense of further extending what had become months of deliberation undertaken at considerable cost to the president's time and political capital—the equivalent of professional suicide. With the discussion and decision behind him, the president's litmus test was not the unverifiable contents of his advisers' hearts but their public conformity with the administration's position.

This was a reasonable and perhaps even necessary demand for Obama to make, since his team had a long year of work behind them by the time the president unveiled the strategy to the nation. Senior officials from the appropriate agencies were included in a large number of review sessions: by one count, the president personally led 25 hours of discussions on the strategy during the autumn of 2009.¹⁴⁸ Because these sessions were conducted in person or via secure video conferencing, the discussions were transparent. Each participant represented a large government organization that possessed the ability—if not always the will—to supply independent information and analysis. Although social and institutional constraints pertained, officials were reasonably free to contribute opinions and recommendations. Under these conditions, even officials who were dissatisfied with the strategy could not claim that they did not share responsibility for it.

Unfortunately, this high level of equity did not extend very far beyond what one account called the “central cast” of the review, which included “Jones, Biden, the secretaries of state and defense, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, Obama's intelligence chiefs, and top generals and diplomats,” along

¹⁴⁸ Kornblutt, Wilson, and DeYoung, “Obama pressed for faster surge” (2009).

with a few other “senior advisers.”¹⁴⁹ To be sure, each of these individuals conferred with a larger circle of confidants, colleagues, and outside authorities. Obama honestly could claim just two months into his presidency that his strategy had been shaped through consultations “with the Afghan and Pakistani governments, with our partners and NATO allies, and with our donors and international organizations.”¹⁵⁰ These wider discussions continued at various levels over the next eight months as the United States refined its approach. McChrystal’s mid-year assessment, for example, drew significantly from the recommendations of 12 American and European security experts as well as dozens of individual and group meetings with international community leaders and Afghans from all walks of life.¹⁵¹

The quality of these discussions with elites outside the Obama administration will be considered in the following chapters. For the present, it suffices to note that the US strategy depended on positive actions by more leaders in more locations than senior American officials could engage personally. Equity for this larger group of elites had to be mediated, and in this respect adherence to the government’s routine modes of public discourse, which favored superficial unity, endangered prospects for broader elite ownership.

Initially, US officials appeared to seek unity by portraying their strategy as a big tent that covered many possible interpretations. Regional security would benefit from renewed attentiveness and a mission focused on al Qaeda.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (March 2009).

¹⁵¹ From the author’s experience serving on the ISAF staff. For a list of 12 advisers to McChrystal’s assessment, see Ackerman, “So Who Were the Advisers for McChrystal’s 60-Day Afghanistan Review?” (2009).

America would add 21,000 combat troops and trainers and an unspecified number of civilian advisers in Afghanistan. It would provide generous aid to Pakistan.¹⁵² Beyond that, the strategy was open to new directions and actions aligned with the axioms of international cooperation, national sovereignty, and government accountability.

The strategy is “not a straitjacket, a detailed blueprint,” the government’s senior representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard C. Holbrooke, told reporters on 27 March, shortly after the president’s remarks. “It’s a framework within which there’s plenty of flexibility to bring in ideas which are not in the report.”¹⁵³ In the same briefing, Riedel said officials “very deliberately do not have timelines in this study” because of Obama’s “determination that we check the metrics, we see how we’re doing, and we remain flexible and adaptable throughout the process.” Pressed on the details of the military commitment, Flournoy—the briefing’s third participant—stayed on message. “We have committed to a regular process of reassessment and evaluation of this mission,” she said. “And I can assure you that the question of troop levels and duration of how many—and rotations, and so forth—will continue to be addressed over time.” Speaking to the press corps later that afternoon, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs described the strategy in expansive terms: “it’s goal-oriented; it’s resourced; it’s regional. It uses all elements of our power, and it will be evaluated each step of the way.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan” (March 2009).

¹⁵³ Riedel, Holbrooke, and Flournoy (2009). The quotes that follow from Riedel and Flournoy are taken from the same briefing transcript.

¹⁵⁴ Gibbs (2009).

Pleading the strategy's broad aspirations proved an untenable position without direct exposure to the rigors of the process or greater specificity about the limits of flexibility and the steps that would ensure accountability across a comprehensive range of US and allied efforts. Trying to fill in the holes, journalists often exhibited the same obsession with quantitative issues that characterized the inner dynamics of the strategy review. During his 27 March press briefing, for instance, Gibbs was asked what the cost of the strategy would be, how many Afghan soldiers and police would be trained, and what the timeline was for troop withdrawal. It was reasonable for the administration to take the high road on these questions by not equating their strategy with hard numbers. To do so at the outset would have fed misperceptions that adjustments later on amounted to failure, or at least a change in strategy. Maintaining flexibility in tactics is not a sin.

In the same briefing, however, Gibbs dodged several questions that touched on the basic appropriateness of the strategy and the value trade-offs it would necessitate. Was there proof of the continued threat posed by al Qaeda? Gibbs could not go into details on intelligence matters, but of course there were current examples of violence originating in the region. What would be done to counter the threat on the Pakistani side of the border? Again, Gibbs could not discuss the details of classified operations. Were the Afghans wrong not to want Western military forces in their country? Afghan and Pakistani leaders, Gibbs assured the press corps, "understand why we're there."¹⁵⁵ Was aid to Pakistan contingent on positive action against extremists? It was better to think of working "with both the Afghans and the Pakistanis achieving those

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. The preceding questions and answers are the author's summary of excerpts from the transcript.

goals and those benchmarks” and of convincing “others that the threat is not simply to us but also to them.”¹⁵⁶

It is not surprising to find a government spokesman, especially one with as large a portfolio as Gibbs, temporizing in this fashion. But the situation did not improve much over time. If anything, officials chose to answer public skeptics by diving deeper into numbers, dates, and other details, rather than clarifying their own thinking and the qualitative grounds on which it was based.

By the time McKiernan’s ouster was announced in May, the strategy’s major implications beyond personnel changes remained opaque enough that one Pentagon correspondent remarked to Mullen at a press conference: “I’m surprised you don’t have any more solid idea of how we need to do better.”¹⁵⁷ Woodward reports that McChrystal’s charge from Gates around this time—to take “a fresh look in the context of the new strategy”—perplexed Riedel, who “wondered what the hell was going on. Just six weeks earlier, he had completed the strategy review, the president had given his speech, and Gates had embraced it fully. Were they starting over again?”¹⁵⁸ From the perspective of elites farther removed from the strategy than Riedel, however, extending the critical examination of the plan through the remainder of 2009 was probably less a question of starting over than of clarifying enough details to move forward. After administration officials provided members of Congress with what was described as a superficial briefing on the strategy’s 60 associated metrics in September, even the president’s Democratic supporters—Senators Levin and Harry Reid, the majority leader—complained that the executive branch was not

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Gates and Mullen, “Press Conference with Secretary Gates and Adm. Mullen on Leadership Changes in Afghanistan From the Pentagon” (May 2009).

¹⁵⁸ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 119.

providing enough information to enlighten pending debates on funding operations.¹⁵⁹

The president's strategy announcement in March 2009 had improved unity in the sense of providing a single set of objectives around which to structure a government-wide approach to Afghanistan. But broader elite ownership of those efforts—identifying and motivating separate actions consistent with the strategy's overall vision—implied a deeper understanding of the strategy than big-tent assurances could provide. Perhaps the single biggest mistake of the review, then, was that the administration turned more inward than outward in the final months of 2009. While the president's March speech was about his own vision for a regional strategy, the December address was about the resources and time available to realize that vision. It was Obama's prerogative to decide these details in closed discussions, but the justifications for such a decision needed to be clear.

Instead, elites outside the administration received contrary signals. As rumors of a possible surge surfaced in mid-2009, the March strategy was suddenly questionable until, just as suddenly in December, it was no longer in doubt. The first source of this mixed message was Obama's apparently sincere desire for a thorough debate. This included positioning Biden against the military as an "aggressive contrarian" who was able "to stir things up" and, in Emanuel's words, say "the things that others at the table don't want to talk about, or which they find uncomfortable."¹⁶⁰ This desire was opposed by the political need to minimize controversy by confining critical discourse within the administration until senior officials emerged with uniform public endorsements

¹⁵⁹ DeYoung, "Obama Says He Won't Rush Troop Decision" (2009).

¹⁶⁰ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 160. Bailey (2009).

of the president's position. These contradictory impulses worked together to ensure that the debate was neither as vigorous as a more open discussion nor as harmonious as *pro forma* backing of a unilateral decision.

The hazardous effects of an internalized debate can be seen in the way that McChrystal's public profile whipsawed following the submission of his classified assessment to Gates at the end of August. McChrystal initially kept quiet as the White House's fall strategy review commenced, which created an air of uncertainty about the president's resolve that was filled by anonymous sources. On 18 September, unidentified military officers told a reporter for the McClatchy newspaper chain that the administration's delay was closing the already narrow window for success in Afghanistan, with three sources saying "the McChrystal they know would resign before he'd stand behind a faltering policy that he thought would endanger his forces or the strategy."¹⁶¹ The following Monday, Woodward leaked his copy of the assessment with the implication in the *Post* and elsewhere that the urgent need for additional forces had set up a confrontation with a reluctant White House and congressional majority.¹⁶²

With guidance from Washington, McChrystal broke his silence, starting with a 23 September interview with the *New York Times* in which he insisted that a "policy debate is warranted," that he had not considered resigning, and that efforts to improve operations in Afghanistan continued in parallel with the review.¹⁶³ In line with this last point, several media stories discussing what

¹⁶¹ Youssef (2009).

¹⁶² Woodward, "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure'" (2009).

¹⁶³ Shanker and Schmitt, "Top General Denies Rift With Obama on Afghan War" (2009). The article's impetus in one or more conversations that McChrystal had with officials in Washington is taken from the author's experience.

McChrystal had done since assuming command in June were released in late September and early October, bringing him back to the surface of public attention. These included media profiles by CBS's *60 Minutes*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Newsweek*, plus the controversial coverage stemming from his October visit to London at the request of the British government, which included his remarks at IISS.¹⁶⁴ McChrystal then submerged from public view after Jones and Gates publicly stressed the propriety of keeping military advice within the chain of command.

However, the administration's insistence on keeping its deliberations private was marred by a public resurgence of arguments against McChrystal's presumed position. Leading newspapers carried anonymous comments about the review that emphasized, as administration sources put it in early October, that discussions were "going back to key assumptions," and the "skeptics are growing."¹⁶⁵ *Newsweek* profiled Biden as "an inconvenient truth teller" two weeks after its article on McChrystal, and the vice president's strong role in foreign policy decisions was the *New York Times Magazine* cover story the Sunday before Obama's speech at West Point.¹⁶⁶ Leaks became irritating enough that Obama was reported to have warned his advisers, "I appreciate not reading about the meetings in *The Washington Post*."¹⁶⁷

Structuring the debate as an internal exercise in devil's advocacy wove a similar web of problems for Obama's closest military and civilian advisers. The process fed media's proclivity for applying the clash of titans formula, since

¹⁶⁴ Martin and Walsh (2009). Filkins, "Stanley McChrystal's Long War" (2009). Thomas, "McChrystal's War" (2009). McChrystal, "Special Address" (2009). Burns (2009).

¹⁶⁵ Chandrasekaran, "Civilian, Military Officials at Odds Over Resources Needed for Afghan Mission" (2009).

¹⁶⁶ Bailey (2009). Traub (2009).

¹⁶⁷ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 232.

opposing positions could be tied directly to major figures in the administration. Such coverage increased the political stakes for participants to emerge from the review with the most significant elements of their reported positions intact. The pressure to be seen to win the argument—combined with the low prospects for changing minds within a small group of senior officials who had been asked to take sides—increased the chances that the review’s proceedings would become more public, as loyalists from one faction or another tried to create external feedback supporting their preferences. Because the review was not transparent, media were more likely to reproduce biased or poorly contextualized information provided by anonymous sources who may have had only second-hand accounts of the deliberations.

At the same time these backstage maneuvers worked to leverage concessions at the margins of strategy, there was a lower chance that any adviser would willingly take the stage to make an argument for a fundamental shift. Internal discussions, as Obama complained to Gibbs, became an exercise in “telling me what I already know” rather than hearing “some information about what people want to do”—possibly because what most officials wanted to do was to stay on the right side of current history.¹⁶⁸ In this sense, the scope and forcefulness of an internal debate could only be constrained by the foreknowledge that personal positions would be leaked and that participants would need to back a presidential decision that could go against them.

As early as October 2009, the doyenne of America’s leading news blog, Arianna Huffington, had made the public implications of supposedly internal dissent clear when she wrote that Biden “should escalate his willingness to act”

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 233.

on his private reservations by resigning “if the president does decide to escalate,” rather than claiming “retroactive righteousness in his memoirs.”¹⁶⁹ Instead, when congressional Democrats sought his support for a quicker withdrawal, Biden told them “I’m not for drawing down the troops.”¹⁷⁰ This may have been both an indication of the vice president’s nuanced skepticism and an admirable expression of personal loyalty and respect for the president’s authority, but who could tell? In a closed discourse where polarized caricatures passed for public disclosure, outsiders could assume the worst. Claiming after the fact that dissent amounted to devil’s advocacy and not die-hard conviction lacked credibility and fostered perceptions that internal divisions and a flawed strategy persisted within the administration.

In addition to the dilemma it posed for senior officials, closed discourse further inflated the importance of the empirical issues that had been the only known issues of disagreement during the review. When asked the day after the president’s announcement whether he was satisfied with 30,000 additional personnel when media reports said he was seeking 40,000, McChrystal noted that his resource request was classified but “that we’re going to have exactly what we need to move forward over the next period.”¹⁷¹ Explaining his interpretation of the president’s timeline, McChrystal said:

Now the 18-month timeline, however, as it will play out, is not an absolute, it’s not an “18 months, everybody leave.” The President has expressed on numerous occasions a long-term strategic partnership with Afghanistan, and that includes all manners of assistance. The concept is as [Afghan] capacity rises, the expected

¹⁶⁹ Huffington (2009).

¹⁷⁰ Wolffe (2010), 244.

¹⁷¹ McChrystal, author’s transcript of discussion with bureau chiefs and senior foreign correspondents (December 2009). For anonymously sourced media reports of troop options, see Kornblut and Jaffe, “Obama seeking options on forces” (2009).

requirement for coalition military forces—maneuver forces—goes down.¹⁷²

House and Senate members continued to zero in on troop levels and withdrawal dates during McChrystal's testimony with Eikenberry the following week.¹⁷³ Jones, Gates, and other Pentagon officials—pressed on the issue of deadlines—also avoided firm commitments on the timetable for withdrawal.¹⁷⁴

The argument that facts on the ground had to dictate the pace and size of a responsible withdrawal could extend the clash of titans narrative when read as the military's attempt to retain control of the president's strategy. One anonymous White House official told Alter that the president's response to comments about a conditions-based withdrawal was "I'm president. I don't give a shit what they say. I'm drawing down those troops."¹⁷⁵ "In July of 2011," Biden told Alter, "you're going to see a whole lot of people moving out. Bet on it."¹⁷⁶ Biden clarified the remark in an interview with ABC when Alter's book was released, saying as "few as a couple thousand troops" could be withdrawn in 2011 and that he was simply dispelling Alter's notion that "a lot in the military think they outmaneuvered the president to render the July date meaningless."¹⁷⁷

This last remark reveals how the quests for certainty and unity that characterized the review conspired with a lack of transparency to confuse public understanding of outcomes. If the goal of internal deliberations between

¹⁷² McChrystal, author's transcript of discussion with bureau chiefs and senior foreign correspondents (December 2009).

¹⁷³ US House of Representatives, House Armed Services Committee (December 2009). US Senate, Senate Armed Services Committee (December 2009).

¹⁷⁴ Mazzetti (2009).

¹⁷⁵ Alter (2010), 392.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 393.

¹⁷⁷ Miller (2010).

March and December 2009 was to resolve specifics such as troop numbers and timelines, then why were senior officials providing different interpretations? And if the differences were matters of interpretation because, in the end, 10,000 fewer troops or the rate of withdrawing forces were things that would sort themselves out over time, then why did the administration seemingly spend so much time arguing over nothing else?

Public accounts of the strategy review have suggested that it was intended to accomplish two goals consistent with critical discourse and one which is not: to question strategic assumptions, to satisfy the responsibility to seriously consider the decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan, and to bring the strategy's narrative more firmly under the administration's control. The closed discourse witnessed between January and December 2009 failed on all three counts. Although administration officials challenged assumptions in private, the sincerity of the administration's desire for a rational, deliberative process was undercut by the empirical drift of the debate and what appeared to be a selective public suppression of contrasting views. Closed discourse did not enforce greater accountability during the review process itself. Official views often were framed by anonymous sources that lacked credibility, and the administration resisted public pressure to open the discourse through legitimate external channels such as congressional testimony by military commanders.¹⁷⁸ At various points during and after the review, participants broke their silence to reverse perceptions of extreme opposition on various details of the president's decision. This only deepened concerns about hypocrisy because—in the absence of better information—those details were

¹⁷⁸ DeYoung, "Obama Says He Won't Rush Troop Decision" (2009).

presented as the most contentious issues in the debate. As a means of controlling information for political benefit, closed discourse instead promoted leaks, perpetuated misunderstandings, and opened avenues of attack to political and institutional rivals.

Overall, Obama's governing principle for the strategy review appeared to be the one he expressed when accepting McChrystal's resignation in June 2010. Following a *Rolling Stone* article that included disrespectful remarks about senior administration officials by members of McChrystal's staff, the president said, "I welcome debate among my team, but I won't tolerate division."¹⁷⁹ That is a distinction made more easily from inside a debate than from outside it—which is to say that, in terms of the legitimacy of public discourse, it is not much of a distinction at all. Debate *was* division for many observers, because the boundaries imposed on the administration's deliberations helped foster this interpretation. The legitimacy of the strategy suffered from the flawed expectations that dissent encouraged in private could remain private, and that any resulting rumors of internal divisions could be erased by public professions of solidarity after the fact.

Unanswered Questions

Examining the poverty of modern strategic thought, Colin Gray notes that "a need for advice on the issues of the day," married to "the human dimension of personal rewards, has the effect of creating a magnetic pull towards practicality in strategic studies." The immediate relevance of the

¹⁷⁹ Obama, "Statement by the President in the Rose Garden" (June 2010). For the comments prompting McChrystal's resignation, see Hastings (2010).

modern strategist's work means that the "strategic theorist as strategic adviser to the polity is obliged—if he or she would be useful—to accept the world-view and terms and conditions of those to be advised."¹⁸⁰ But what happens when leaders have yet to define their views or the terms and conditions that apply to their relationship with advisers? If the assessment of the strategy review in this chapter appears too harsh, it is important to remember, as Rodney Barker cautions, that the most important form of legitimacy is self-legitimation.¹⁸¹ To the extent that the review allowed Obama and other administration officials to understand each other and own the strategy, it served a useful purpose.

The review therefore accomplished several things. It identified al Qaeda as the focus of the strategy, opened the door to reconciliation with the Taliban, and produced a presidential terms sheet asserting civilian authority and favoring a "narrower mission and the express tighter timeline in which to show progress and transfer responsibility."¹⁸² The administration defined its future efforts in Afghanistan both in terms of aspirations—gain momentum against the insurgency, transfer security operations to Afghan forces, and improve Afghan governance—and in language that circumscribed those aspirations within a desire to avoid "fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation building."¹⁸³

Throughout the review process, escalation skeptics asserted themselves enough to signal their independence and to impose restrictions on an extensive military commitment. Supporters received most of what they sought, reducing concerns that security or international obligations might be sacrificed to

¹⁸⁰ Gray (1999), 122-123.

¹⁸¹ Barker, *Legitimizing Identities* (2001).

¹⁸² Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 388.

¹⁸³ Quote from *ibid.*, 387. For mission objectives, see McChrystal, "Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Subject: COMISAF's initial assessment" (2009), 1-3.

political expediency or democratic squeamishness. Above all, the review apparently increased the personal confidence of the small circle of senior officials responsible for the decision. Gates, for instance, confessed he had “real reservations about significant further commitments of American military” in the spring of 2009, as the Soviet experience demonstrated that more troops could prove a “hindrance rather than a help because we begin to look like occupiers to the Afghans.”¹⁸⁴ By September, Gates was arguing publicly that these concerns could be mitigated by “the behavior of those troops and their attitudes and their interactions with the Afghans,” and he eventually endorsed the surge.¹⁸⁵

Obama’s self-assurance mattered the most, of course, and despite disappointments with the discussions he appeared convinced that he had made the right choice. Desiring to contrast his statesmanship with what he considered the excessive bravado of his predecessor, Obama was reluctant to use terms like “winning” and “victory” in reference to the aims and prospects of efforts against a “a non-state actor, a shadowy operation like al-Qaeda.”¹⁸⁶ In the months following his decision, the president would emphasize that resolving Afghanistan was “very hard stuff” that would “take us several years to work through.”¹⁸⁷ But at the start of a February 2010 operation in Helmand Province that was considered to be the first major test for the strategy, close advisers

¹⁸⁴ Gates, “Interview with CNN” (2009). CBS News, “Transcript of interview with Defense Secretary Gates” (2009), 3.

¹⁸⁵ Gates and Mullen, “DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates and Adm. Mullen from the Pentagon” (September 2009). See also the changing characterizations of Gates’s position in Chandrasekaran, “Civilian, Military Officials at Odds Over Resources Needed for Afghan Mission” (2009), and Jaffe, Wilson, and DeYoung, “U.S. envoy resists increase in troops” (2009).

¹⁸⁶ Chandrasekaran, “Differing views of new Afghanistan strategy” (2009).

¹⁸⁷ Wenner (2010).

described him as reasonably optimistic. “The president said recently that there might be a little more pessimism than is warranted,” Axelrod said at the time. “He thought that he was doing the right thing when he did his strategy review, but he’s more confident now.”¹⁸⁸

The degree of difference between Obama’s qualified confidence and “a little more pessimism than is warranted” among other elites is significant, however, because it represented the difference between choosing a strategy and implementing operations in a manner consistent with the president’s choice. Based on the limited number of first-hand accounts that describe the thoughts and actions of US officials who participated in the review, it is likely that by the end of 2009 most felt that the president’s chosen strategy was legitimate. But proof of this conjecture is of limited relevance, since the strategy’s success relied on a much larger set of civilian and military elites who had not been part of the administration’s conversation and therefore needed to retrace the administration’s footsteps, with the possibility that they would reach different destinations.

Legislators, military forces, diplomats, and civilian aid workers from dozens of nations, Afghan and Pakistani officials and community leaders—these groups did not share all of the administration’s concerns, nor did they predominantly follow the logic of consequence. The projected cost of the operation to the United States was not a constraint on allies or aid organizations, except as a rough guide to their own resource decisions. The difference between 30,000 and 40,000 American troops, while significant to leaders at the national level concerned with force distribution and commitments

¹⁸⁸ Wolffe (2010), 246.

from other NATO nations, made less difference to leaders at the regional and local levels.¹⁸⁹ The 18-month timeline to begin the drawdown of US forces was open to multiple interpretations. “Is the surge a way of helping us leave more quickly, or is the timeline a way to help win support for the surge?” one congressional staffer asked the *Washington Post*. An anonymous military commander told the newspaper that he and his colleagues “don’t know if this is all over in 18 months, or whether this is just a progress report that leads to minor changes.”¹⁹⁰

Since the review’s critical discourse had been imperfectly internalized, such questions about the strategy’s quantitative features and effects persisted, even if Obama, Gates, McChrystal, and a few others had been able to answer them to their own satisfaction. More importantly, the review did not resolve major qualitative issues associated with the appropriateness of the president’s strategy to the situation and people in Afghanistan.

To understand the importance of these issues to elites charged with implementing the strategy, it is useful to return to McChrystal’s August 2009 assessment, which made no specific recommendations on time or resources. Although he urged prompt action to address Afghanistan’s deteriorating security and cautioned that the strategy must place “enough things, in enough places, for enough time,” the core of McChrystal’s proposal was qualitative.¹⁹¹ “Success is achievable,” McChrystal wrote, “but it will not be attained simply by trying harder or “doubling down” on the previous strategy.”

¹⁸⁹ Sheridan (2009).

¹⁹⁰ Chandrasekaran, “Differing views of new Afghanistan strategy” (2009).

¹⁹¹ McChrystal, “Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Subject: COMISAF’s initial assessment,” (2009), 2-21.

Additional resources are required, but focusing on force or resource requirements misses the point entirely. The key take away for this assessment is the urgent need for a significant change to our strategy and the way we think and operate.¹⁹²

In addition to the objectives of reversing the momentum of the insurgency and building up Afghan forces to take responsibility for their own security, McChrystal defined his operational approach in terms of three broader social and institutional changes:

- ISAF must change its operational culture “to focus on protecting the Afghan people, understanding their environment, and building relationships with them”¹⁹³
- The command must create “more coherent unity of command within ISAF” and foster “stronger unity of effort across the international community”¹⁹⁴
- ISAF must facilitate an improvement in Afghan governance “that addresses the worst of today’s high level abuse of power, low-level corruption, and bureaucratic incapacity.”¹⁹⁵

These are rather remarkable conditions for success, because they originate in an admission that the international forces and the foreign ally that McChrystal had inherited were not up to the task without radical reformations and mutual understandings that did not exist in 2009.

In the COIN guidance he developed for his forces shortly after taking command, McChrystal encouraged troops to think of “counterinsurgency as an

¹⁹² Ibid., 1-1.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 2-1.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 2-16.

argument to earn the support of the people.”¹⁹⁶ Although success depended on the persuasiveness of the coalition’s argument relative to insurgents, the central concern was what precisely the coalition’s argument was. The task of defining that argument began not with insurgents but among a diverse collection of friendly to neutral elites who needed to accept the new strategy by determining whether the words and deeds it advocated corresponded to their interests and values. The outlines of the president’s strategy—focus on al Qaeda, transfer responsibility to Afghans, impose limits on time and resources—combined with McChrystal’s emphasis on organization and culture to pose two unanswered questions for critical discourse during the strategic performance period that began in earnest in 2010.

First, at the operational level, was the chosen strategy in Afghanistan “counterinsurgency,” and, if so, what did that mean? In the public mind, the administration’s internal discourse could be reduced to a choice of appropriate tactics: COIN versus counterterrorism. Yet the regional strategy addressing the common threat from Afghanistan and Pakistan—violence by al Qaeda—could resemble both approaches. To what extent did killing the enemy help or hinder the task of winning popular support? If the strategy needed to stop short of fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation building, as Obama’s term sheet directed, did COIN doctrine even apply to operations in Afghanistan?

Second, at the tactical level—given an increase in military forces but a desire to leverage non-military means of promoting stability and transition functions to the Afghan government—what was the proper division of responsibility between Americans and Afghans? Who was in charge? How far

¹⁹⁶ McChrystal, “ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance” (2009).

could or should US surge forces expand their competency in the use of force into fostering governance and economic development? What level of risk should Americans be willing to accept in the interest of promoting stability and preventing harm to Afghan civilians? What could the coalition reasonably expect from the Afghan government? What standards applied to the professionalism of its security forces or the integrity and accountability of its civilian officials?

The task of answering these questions could fill separate volumes. But the *process* of answering these questions implied a common need for an ongoing critical discourse on US strategy in Afghanistan. None of these issues could be considered in isolation. Each drew from historical precedents for discourse that determined how specific validity and equity claims would be framed and evaluated. The diversity of elites with stakes in Afghanistan and the variety of the traditions through which they approached critical discourse practically ensured that the strategy's key questions would remain contested. In theory, US officials could increase elite consensus in the near term by expanding the equity of discourse, but it remained to be seen whether or not communication could surmount real and artificial barriers to more open dialogue.

The way in which critical discourse proceeded during the strategic performance period is not a matter of mere academic interest. Throughout 2010, the pattern of critical discourse on the meaning of counterinsurgency, the role of the military, and the imperfections of Afghans—which formed along the fault lines of validity and equity—would continue to shape coalition actions and the eventual fate of US involvement in Afghanistan. To the extent that these

three issues will figure in future decisions to wage war, critical discourse about Afghanistan also will influence the direction of public debates on US national security for decades to come.

By seeking certainty and unity through internal discussions on its strategy in Afghanistan, the Obama administration reached the limits of traditional, closed discourse among a small group of high-ranking elites. Those limits were a rough consensus on desired ends and a negative, empirical definition of acceptable means. The strategy told other elites and the public “that we’re not doing everything, and we’re not doing it forever,” as one anonymous US official remarked in December 2009. “The hardest intellectual exercise” in 2010, the official predicted, “will be settling on how much is enough.”¹⁹⁷

For the most part, however, the hardest intellectual exercise in the first 12 months of the strategic performance period was not as unilateral or empirical as this comment suggests. In Afghanistan in 2010, as in any place at any time, the purely quantitative solution to the problem of limited time and resources was to do what was possible with what was available—or to reconsider what was available. As the different interpretations of constraints emerging from the strategy review indicated, *how much is enough* was a negotiable position. What mattered more than that practical calculus—what the strategy would sooner or later need to produce in order to establish terms for its own demise—were legitimate standards promoting agreement on *what is acceptable*.

¹⁹⁷ Chandrasekaran, “Differing views of new Afghanistan strategy” (2009).

CHAPTER 4

COUNTERINSURGENCY REDUX: DOCTRINE AS DISCOURSE

If we've learned anything from the experience of counterinsurgency over the last few hundred years, it's that adaptation and change are normal and critically important.

— David Kilcullen
June 30, 2010¹

Shortly after President Barack Obama announced in December 2009 that he would send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, Eliot A. Cohen went out of his way in the *Washington Post* to chart the natural limits of presidential precision in matters of military strategy:

It is impolite, but probably true, to say that when President Obama announced in March that he had a “comprehensive, new strategy” for victory in Afghanistan, he had no precise idea what he was talking about. In Washington parlance, the word “strategy” usually means “to-do list” or at best “action plan.” As for “comprehensive” and “new,” they usually mean merely “better than whatever my predecessors did.”²

As a result of his extended strategy review, however, Obama’s qualified support of his military advisers’ recommendations amounted in Cohen’s eyes to a definitive choice for a more precise operational approach—namely, counterinsurgency.

¹ Northam (2010).

² Cohen, “Obama’s COIN toss” (2009).

But it was not entirely clear that the United States had elected to wage a counterinsurgency (COIN) war. On the one hand, American officials emerged from the 2009 strategy review to pursue the kind of comprehensive program of security, governance, and development prescribed by COIN doctrine. General Stanley A. McChrystal—the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—led these efforts by issuing directives that emphasized COIN fundamentals such as protecting the population and partnering with Afghans.³ On the other hand, Obama avoided the term *counterinsurgency* in public statements about his strategy, going as far as providing written guidance to his national security team that Afghanistan would *not* be an example of “fully resourced counterinsurgency or nation building.”⁴

Regardless of whether Obama and his team paid too high a price by handling their quasi-private deliberations in a way that complicated rather than explained these nuances, their creation now had to step out from behind the curtain. Having selected finite escalation on a timetable, the ability of US officials to distinguish between the private and public aspects of their strategy—and the value in doing so—all but disappeared. If the 2009 strategy review was about the self-legitimation of the ruler’s authority in the eyes of his closest national security peers, then the subsequent strategic performance period was about the legitimacy of an operational strategy within what Weber called the administrative staff—the subordinate elites who must execute the strategy. These elites informed and were informed by a larger community of public commentators who also craved equitable access to relevant information on the strategy. Discourse therefore needed to promote a much broader and more

³ McChrystal, “ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance” (2009).

⁴ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 387.

specific understanding and acceptance of what various actors had to do to support the president's plan.

To satisfy these elites and assure their ownership of the strategy in 2010, officials needed one or more heuristics that advanced a common definition of the problem in Afghanistan and a common approach to solving it. As this chapter will demonstrate, the strategy's operational heuristic—for better and worse—centered on the theory and practice of counterinsurgency as described in US military doctrine.

As Cohen pointed out, doctrine was always contingent on local circumstances:

A senior official slinging COIN argot (“oil spot tactics,” “combined action platoons” and the like) at meetings far from the fight is one thing. An infantry captain plunked down in the mountains of Nurestan, figuring out how to control rugged terrain with a few American platoons, a larger force of questionable Afghan soldiers and police, and a mistrustful, war-weary population is something very different. With counterinsurgency, as with all military matters, implementing doctrine proves much more difficult than discussing it.⁵

Although doctrine is typically a way to standardize military technique, COIN doctrine thus could have the looser, improvisational air of a running conversation about the right things to do in different places under changing conditions. In this sense, the project of implementing COIN resembled critical discourse among mid-level soldiers, diplomats, aid workers, and assorted regional experts whose focus was more local than the Obama administration or its elite supporters and critics in Washington.

⁵ Cohen, “Obama’s COIN toss” (2009).

The final object of this discourse, however, was to establish an operational orthodoxy and uniform expectations of performance for a range of military and civilian elites. In this regard, COIN set an uncertain standard of validity because people lacked a common understanding of the doctrine's basic tenets. The assumed appropriateness of COIN rested in part on a narrative of military innovation through dissent in Iraq that excluded other military options Obama had sought in the case of Afghanistan. Furthermore, proof of COIN's effectiveness over the course of 2010 depended on consequences that were hidden by secretive actions and the selective presentation of closely held information. Overall, doctrine was a poor medium for discourse on the legitimacy of US strategy because it opened doors for criticism and misinterpretation that military leaders could not close without appearing to contradict themselves or their civilian colleagues and superiors.

COIN in Microcosm: Waiting for Results in Marjah

Before examining how COIN doctrine succeeded or failed in arguing its legitimacy as an operational approach in the abstract, it is important to demonstrate that the doctrine did not produce results that would quickly validate the strategy in practice. That case can be made by briefly examining the first major military operation conducted in 2010. The short-term results of COIN efforts in Marjah, a rural community in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province, were not a clear proof of concept but an ambiguous outcome that satisfied observers only to the extent that they were willing to trust in the doctrine's ultimate effectiveness.

United States Marines and Afghan soldiers descended from helicopters into Marjah at around 2 a.m. Afghan time on Saturday, 13 February 2010—the first move of a joint NATO-Afghan operation called *Moshtarak*. Although the precise timing of the attack was a secret, there was no doubt in the enemy's mind, or anyone else's, that it was coming. For several weeks, British and Afghan troops had been advancing southward from nearby Nad Ali in preparation for the attack, and the British press reported that US special forces had been raiding the area in an effort to kill or capture local Taliban leaders. As early as 3 February, Marine Colonel George Amland, the deputy commander of Marine forces in southern Afghanistan, had told reporters that his forces would advance “to gain control” of Marjah as “the leading edge of the president's surge force.”⁶

The authors of *Moshtarak*—ISAF's military commanders and their allies in the Afghan army and national police forces—had good reasons for giving up the element of surprise by flagging their intent. The public announcement of the operation was in part an attempt to wage psychological warfare against the insurgents. “We are trying to take away any hope of victory” for the Taliban, McChrystal said.⁷ Speaking to war correspondents on 4 February, he confessed the coalition was “not interested in how many Taliban we kill. We'd much rather have them see the inevitability that things are changing and just accept that.”⁸ Officials described Marjah to embedded reporters as “the biggest southern town under Taliban control and the linchpin of the militants' logistical

⁶ Quote from Perry (2010). For additional details on the launch of the operation, see Chandrasekaran, “U.S. launches major surge against Taliban in Afghanistan” (2010); DeYoung, “Afghanistan offensive is key test of Obama's strategy” (2010); Marquez (2010).

⁷ Filkins, “Afghan Offensive Is New War Model” (2010).

⁸ Thompson (2010).

and opium-smuggling network”—a “sore” that had been “hampering U.S. and Afghan efforts in the province.”⁹ Announcing and then accomplishing the feat of routing the Taliban on its own turf could result in “a fundamental change in Helmand and, by extension, the entire nation of Afghanistan,” said Brigadier General Lawrence D. Nicholson, the commander of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade.¹⁰

Another reason for announcing *Moshtarak* in advance was ISAF’s renewed commitment to partner with Afghans at various levels of government and community life—a commitment signaled by the name of the operation, a Dari word meaning “together.” *Moshtarak* “will be a joint Afghan army, police, U.S. Marines and ISAF forces operation led by Afghans,” Afghan defense ministry spokesman Mohammad Zahir Azimi assured reporters on 3 February.¹¹ Afghan President Hamid Karzai authorized the operation, which included one Afghan for every two American troops. During the Marine offensive in Helmand the previous summer, the ratio had been closer to one Afghan for every 10 Americans. This higher level of effort by Afghans was what “the Afghan people want to see, and the American people need to see,” according to the State Department’s representative to the Marines.¹²

At the local level, Afghan and ISAF officials consulted with Marjah’s elders, who discussed the need to avoid civilian casualties with Helmand’s governor, Gulab Mangal, as well as Nicholson and his Afghan counterpart, Brigadier General Mahayoodine Ghouri. For its part, the coalition urged the

⁹ CBS News and the Associated Press, “Major Offensive against Taliban Begins” (2010). Perry (2010).

¹⁰ Chandrasekaran, “U.S. launches major surge against Taliban in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹¹ Marquez (2010).

¹² Chandrasekaran, “U.S. launches major surge against Taliban in Afghanistan” (2010).

elders to convince local Taliban to lay down their arms and to keep civilians who hadn't left the area in their homes once the fighting started. In return, the coalition pledged to improve Marjah's fortunes. "We want to show people that we can deliver police, and services, and development," said Lieutenant General Mohammed Karimi, the deputy chief of staff for the Afghan army. "We want to convince the Afghans that the government is for them."¹³

Propping up the Afghans, of course, was the new US strategy, characterized by what James Jones, President Barack Obama's national security adviser, called "the cohesion that now exists between all elements of national power and international power."¹⁴ Promoting *Moshtarak* as an operational incarnation of the strategy was a gamble to revive public confidence in US efforts, which had seemed to drift while the Obama administration debated its way ahead over the course of 2009. Appearing on *Fox News Sunday* on 14 February, Jones emphasized that the United States was firing on all cylinders. *Moshtarak* represented "the first major operation in which we will demonstrate, I think successfully, that the new elements of the strategy which combine not only security operations but economic reform and good governance at the local and regional level, with a much more visible presence of Afghan forces, will take place."¹⁵ Commanders in Afghanistan expressed American aspirations more memorably if less cautiously than Jones. "We've got a government in a box, ready to roll in," McChrystal said.¹⁶ Referring to the system of irrigation canals constructed with US funds and personnel in the

¹³ Filkins, "Afghan Offensive Is New War Model" (2010).

¹⁴ Fox News, "Afghan Strategy is More Than Just Military, National Security Adviser Says" (2010).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Filkins, "Afghan Offensive Is New War Model" (2010).

1950's, Nicholson said, "The United States built Marjah. We're going to come back and fix it."¹⁷

The public gaze on Marjah immediately drew what presidential adviser David Axelrod had called "a little more pessimism than is warranted," fueled by several inconvenient facts.¹⁸ On close inspection, Marjah did not appear to be worth the effort to many observers. Although early media reports described it as the home of 80,000 to 125,000 Afghans—an area more "urban and dense than other places Marines have so far been able to clear and hold"—in reality Marjah held fewer than 50,000 residents and at the time was not a legally established district or town.¹⁹

If the strategy was limited by the pragmatic recognition that the United States had to pick and choose its battles, why devote an estimated 5,500 American and Afghan troops to Marjah? What did the one-to-ten ratio of coalition forces to local residents needed for minimal security in Marjah portend for later efforts to secure much larger population centers such as Kandahar? "Taking this nearly worthless postage stamp of real estate has tied down about half of all the real combat power and aviation assets of the international coalition in Afghanistan for a quarter of a year," Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason wrote in *Foreign Policy* on the first day of the operation. "The possibility that wasting massive amounts of U.S. and British blood, treasure, and time just to establish an Afghan Potemkin village with a 'government in a box' might be exactly what the Taliban wants the coalition to do has apparently

¹⁷ Chandrasekaran, "U.S. launches major surge against Taliban in Afghanistan" (2010).

¹⁸ Wolffe (2010), 246.

¹⁹ Quote from Marquez (2010). For early corrections to media reports about Marjah's size, see Foust (2010), and Dressler (2010), 1.

not occurred to either the press or to the generals who designed this operation.”²⁰

As caustic as Johnson and Mason’s assessment was, even something as superficial as a Potemkin village emerged slowly in Marjah, due mostly to the problems posed by ISAF’s Afghan partners. “For all the talk of the Marjah operation being ‘Afghan-led,’” Dexter Filkins concluded in the *New York Times* on 21 February, “the truth, from the get-go, was that it was a mostly American and British show—in directing, supplying and, most of all, fighting.”²¹ Newly recruited Afghan soldiers deployed to Marjah were “not willing to do the job it takes to defend their country,” according to one Marine rifleman working with them. “They’re so worthless that their worthlessness doesn’t faze anyone anymore.”²² Yet Afghanistan’s shaky army and paramilitary police shone in comparison to civilian governance. Key officials appointed by the central government lived 20 miles away, in the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, “spending little time” in Marjah and demonstrating reluctance “to coordinate with U.S. and British development specialists.”²³ The district governor appointed by Kabul—Abdul Zahir Aryan, known as Haji Zahir—was illiterate and had only recently returned to Afghanistan after more than 20 years in Germany and Pakistan, four of which he spent in a German prison for the attempted murder of his stepson.²⁴

²⁰ Johnson and Mason (2010).

²¹ Filkins, “Prize on the Battlefield of Marja May Be Momentum” (2010).

²² Lamothe, “Undisciplined Afghans endanger Marjah Marines” (2010).

²³ Chandrasekaran, “‘Still a long way to go’ for U.S. operation in Marja, Afghanistan” (2010).

²⁴ Partlow and Bhatti, “New top official in Marja, Afghanistan, was convicted of stabbing stepson” (2010).

During Zahir's first visit with local elders, it was clear that the people of Marjah were not rushing to embrace their liberators. "The Taliban provided us with a very peaceful environment," one resident said. "They did not bother us." In contrast, as others pointed out, the Afghan government "drops bombs on us" and "steals all the money that the foreigners give us."²⁵

Two months after *Moshtarak* began, the *New York Times* reported that "Afghan officials acknowledge that the Taliban have in some ways retaken the momentum there, including killing or beating locals allied with the central government and its American backers."²⁶ By the end of May 2010, a little more than three months into the operation, McChrystal was prodding local commanders to pick up the pace in Helmand Province. "We don't have as many days as we'd like" before support for the operation faded, he told his Marine battalion commander in Marjah. Addressing the gap between gradual progress in the province and perceptions in the United States and Europe that *Moshtarak* was failing, McChrystal said "You don't feel it here, but I'll tell you, it's a bleeding ulcer outside."²⁷

Administration officials considered concern about the lack of progress in Marjah premature. Although at the time America had been at war for more than eight years, some thought the clock had been reset after Obama's election. America "has gotten its head into this conflict in Afghanistan, as far as I'm

²⁵ Chandrasekaran, "Afghan official who will govern Marja pays first visit, makes plea to residents" (2010).

²⁶ Shanker, Cooper and Oppel, "Elite U.S. Units Step Up Effort in Afghan City Before Attack" (2010).

²⁷ Nissenbaum (2010). Based on the author's participation in the meetings discussed here, the article somewhat mischaracterizes McChrystal's remarks as referring to a real lack of progress rather than a perceived lack of progress. See ISAF's official response at McClatchy Washington Bureau (2010). Regardless, the public perception McChrystal was addressing in his remark is the relevant point here.

concerned, really only in the last year,” Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told US troops in December 2009.²⁸ With modern insurgencies lasting approximately 10 years, the Taliban’s resurgence in Afghanistan around 2006 offered hope that the United States still had several years to turn things around.²⁹ Obama told an interviewer in October 2010 that “when you tick off these metrics that have quote-unquote ‘failed’—well, they haven’t failed yet. They haven’t succeeded yet.”³⁰

Indeed, given time, conditions in Marjah did improve. A year after the Marines arrived, death, defection, desertion, and disaffection with the insurgency’s brutal methods had thinned the Taliban’s ranks throughout Helmand. Local militias, under the awkward but politically agreeable title of Interim Security for Critical Infrastructure, were keeping a fragile peace in exchange for US funding. A new district governor, Abdul Mutalib Majbor, claimed to travel with ease between Marjah and Lashkar Gah, and expanded freedom of movement appeared to be boosting commerce and participation in local elections. One senior US officer told *The Economist* in February 2011 that Marjah was “safer than Detroit.”³¹

But the perspective that urged patience in Marjah and the rest of Afghanistan was the perspective of a classic COIN campaign, which according to current US doctrine went beyond fighting insurgents to doing what was needed to “address the legitimate grievances insurgents use to generate popular

²⁸ Bumiller, “Gates’s Trip Hits Snags in Two Theaters” (2009).

²⁹ Connable and Libicki (2010).

³⁰ Wenner (2010).

³¹ *The Economist*, “The surge in Afghanistan: More please, sir” (2011). For additional media reports on progress in Helmand, see Yousafzai and Moreau (2011), and Boak (2011).

support.”³² One contributor to the influential *Small Wars Journal* made the case this way in September 2010:

Counterinsurgent operations in southern Afghanistan require skill and patience for tactical successes to contribute to operational and strategic goals. Expectations of a quick, decisive victory in Marjah are inaccurate. It should not be surprising that preliminary success has taken more than six months. The current challenge requires more than killing or capturing insurgents; it requires convincing the local populace that the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and its security forces are legitimate and worthy of their active support.³³

John A. Nagl, a former Army officer who helped write the US military’s field manual on counterinsurgency, told radio audiences in July 2010 that Marjah represents “the way counterinsurgency is unfortunately.” Arguing that the “American people have demonstrated that they are willing to support engagement in long wars,” Nagl said it was important for Afghanistan’s new top commander, General David Petraeus, to demonstrate “gradual improvements in the security situation, the economic growth” as well as “progress politically and in terms of Afghan governance and Afghan security forces in particular over the course of the next year.”³⁴

Translating Choice to Change: COIN Doctrine’s Validity as Discourse

Since Afghanistan had the world’s largest supply of the kind of legitimate social grievances that comprehensive COIN operations were designed to address, the argument made in Marjah and other places surge forces entered in

³² US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 18.

³³ Van Ess (2010).

³⁴ Public Radio International, “Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” *The World* (2010).

2010 was that everyone would need to wait for proof of the strategy's success. As the American military mission in Afghanistan entered its tenth year, however, the questions raised by operations in Marjah could only continue to dog the strategy.

How should ISAF and its Afghan allies balance the military violence needed to maintain order against the civilian inducements of more accountable governance and economic prosperity? Did killing insurgents increase or decrease the prospects for peace in Afghanistan and less terrorist violence against the West? How reliable were Afghanistan's government and its security forces? Where did the loyalties of the Afghan people lie? What needed to change, and when, to convince people that ISAF and the Afghans were winning? Could the modest gains in Marjah and other places be maintained once the coalition began to withdraw? Was the effort worth the cost?

Results in the field could not immediately answer these questions, so perceptions of the strategy's validity must have rested on other factors. In theory, one of those factors could be procedural equity, and McChrystal did attempt to deal with questions about the legitimacy of the strategy by discussing it directly with his troops. The ultimate argument for the legitimacy of COIN, however, was the authority conveyed by the history and mythology surrounding the doctrine itself. In this sense, the doctrine proved to be both too flexible and too rigid. The various manifestations of COIN suggested several possible standards of performance without clarifying which applied to the current US strategy. At the same time, the assumption that the US Army had addressed the question of the strategy's effectiveness during the Iraq surge

stifled some discussion about its applicability in a very different context. COIN doctrine in Afghanistan therefore remained a solution in search of its proof.

The Need for Critical Discourse in “War by Franchise.”

“Counterinsurgency is war by franchise,” as Bing West described it in his recent book on the strategy’s misfortunes, *The Wrong War*. “The generals at corporate headquarters provide guidelines, like protecting the population. Each battalion operates as an individual store, responsible for its own profit and loss.”³⁵ The chasm between choosing an overarching strategy and changing the situation on the ground was widened by the distribution of the Afghan people and the ISAF units protecting them. As opposed to Iraq, where more than 60 percent of the population lives in a few urban areas, more than 75 percent of Afghans live in dispersed rural areas.³⁶ ISAF’s main effort focused on a horseshoe-shaped band of districts running from southern Helmand up through Kandahar Province and southwards toward the border with Pakistan.³⁷ But the differences between communities in that 200-mile-long area—as well as the differences between the dynamics of Pashtun rebellion in the south versus those in the east, north, or west—underscored the localized nature of operations. Geographic distinctions were heightened by wide disparities in experience, training, equipment, and operational restrictions on the military forces from more than 40 nations supporting NATO’s mission.³⁸

At times, the discourse of this war by franchise had the loose feel of Eastern philosophy. *Newsweek*’s Evan Thomas described McChrystal as “a kind of Zen warrior, preaching that often ‘the shot you don’t fire is more

³⁵ West, *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan* (2011), 64.

³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency (2010).

³⁷ Filkins, “Afghan Offensive Is New War Model” (2010).

³⁸ Abshire and Weinrod (2010).

important than the one you do.”³⁹ The explanations of COIN offered by the field manual and by current and former military officers advocating the strategy could verge on the cryptic. Nagl and Nathaniel C. Fick at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), for example, advised units headed to Afghanistan to embrace the doctrine’s paradoxes, such as “sometimes the more you protect your force, the less secure you may be,” or “sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction.”⁴⁰

In the end, however, COIN doctrine was doctrine, and it was therefore vulnerable to the charge of encouraging excessive strategic or tactical rigidity rather than woolly thinking. Texts such as Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* and the COIN field manual demonstrated “the tendency to distil general rules of counter-insurgency from particular struggles and then seek to apply them in radically different circumstances,” observed Adam Roberts of Oxford’s Centre for International Studies.⁴¹ In a typical condemnation of how COIN doctrine translated to tactical restrictions that put troops at risk, one Army medic told the *Washington Examiner* in October 2010 that “we can’t shoot back” if insurgents “shoot at us and drop their weapon.” Another soldier told the newspaper that “war is war and this is no war. I don’t know what this is.”⁴²

Following Nagl’s conclusion that the US Army after Vietnam “continued to prepare itself to fight the wrong war,” McChrystal considered ISAF’s adoption of COIN doctrine a “change in operational culture” that created a steep and

³⁹ Thomas (2009).

⁴⁰ Fick and Nagl, “Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition” (2009). See US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 47-51, for a longer list of paradoxes associated with COIN doctrine.

⁴¹ A. Roberts (2009), 36.

⁴² Carter (2010).

sometimes counterintuitive learning curve for his forces.⁴³ Military personnel schooled in conventional approaches to warfare could not be ordered to change their operational mind-set. To understand COIN well enough to implement it locally, they had to accept the doctrine through critical discussion of its application in Afghanistan. McChrystal therefore traveled to remote outposts several times each week, where he led frank discussions with battalion or company commanders, troops, and Afghans about local application of the strategy. Starting in February 2010, he also hosted monthly virtual town hall meetings during which coalition personnel of any rank could talk to him and the command's sergeant major, Michael T. Hall, from locations equipped with secure Internet connections.⁴⁴ Without devoting a considerable amount of time to visiting troops—which for McChrystal sometimes included joining them on patrol—"you do risk forgetting exactly what they are doing," he told ABC News. "And it's important for me to look them in the eye and understand, as best you can, what they're thinking."⁴⁵

The *Rolling Stone* profile that led to McChrystal's resignation provides the bluntest indication of the authenticity of the ISAF commander's dialogue with resolutely skeptical subordinates. Visiting a platoon outside Kandahar that was convinced that his "rules of engagement put soldiers' lives in even greater

⁴³ Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* (2002), 208. McChrystal, "Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Subject: COMISAF's initial assessment," (2009), 1-2.

⁴⁴ Based on the author's experience accompanying McChrystal on battlefield circulations and running his virtual town hall program. Although McChrystal often asked reporters to keep his exchanges with troops off the record in order to facilitate an uncensored exchange of views, the public record of McChrystal's engagements with troops suggest that they were reasonably frank and substantive exchanges on the particular challenges of the mission. See, for example, Oppel, "Tighter Rules Fail to Stem Deaths of Innocent Afghans at Checkpoints" (2010); Nissenbaum (2010); and Schiffrin (2010).

⁴⁵ Schiffrin (2010).

danger,” McChrystal “went on a foot patrol with the troops—not some bullshit photo-op stroll through a market, but a real live operation in a dangerous war zone.” Direct engagement earned McChrystal some degree of personal authority, indicated by the fact that a corporal killed by a bomb after the general’s first visit reportedly had “started to look up to” him. More importantly, the discussions reinforced the validity of the strategy for the platoon, at least in the abstract. “I get COIN,” a staff sergeant told the magazine’s reporter. “I get all that. McChrystal comes here, explains it, it makes sense.” From the platoon’s perspective, problems arose when the echelons of command between the unit and McChrystal misapplied the doctrine because “somebody is trying to cover their ass, or because they just don’t understand it themselves.”⁴⁶

McChrystal had diagnosed the limited understanding of COIN doctrine among military forces in his August 2009 assessment, which emphasized ISAF’s failure to execute “the basics of COIN doctrine.”⁴⁷ Spreading a practical gospel of COIN thus became a priority for the headquarters. McChrystal established a thousand-person “intermediate operational headquarters”—the ISAF Joint Command—to “synchronize operational activities and local civil-military coordination and ensure a shared understanding of the mission throughout the force.”⁴⁸ He also created a COIN Advisory and Assistance Team with representatives assigned to ISAF’s regional commands to facilitate

⁴⁶ All quotes in this paragraph from Hastings (2010).

⁴⁷ McChrystal, “Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Subject: COMISAF’s initial assessment” (2009), 2-11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2-14.

information sharing and continuity between units—a project that included a magazine called *COIN Common Sense*.⁴⁹

However, as complaints from the field and the doctrine's own emphasis on complexity and paradox made clear, the sense needed to implement COIN was far from common. By defining adherence to COIN doctrine as the motivation for sustaining a critical discourse on military performance, commanders were not making better sense of the strategy as much as defining it against a concept that meant different things to different people.

The fact that incomplete, subjective discourse was an inherent feature of COIN operations should have come as no surprise. McChrystal's COIN guidance, after all, had followed the path of the counterinsurgency canon by describing COIN as “an argument to earn the support of the people.”⁵⁰ In other words, the strategy asserted its necessity specifically *because* of a lack of consensus on the proper uses of violence and stable political and economic arrangements. COIN was a strategy of mass conversion to a particular vision of legitimacy, but what was that vision?

Losing the Link Between Purpose and Method. Problems with elite perceptions of the applicability of COIN in Afghanistan began with the gradual introduction of objectives and methods that departed significantly from the original motive for US involvement: punishment of the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. The terrorist strikes in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania prompted a widely supported military response, sanctioned in part by NATO's first invocation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty confirming that “an armed attack on one or more of the Allies in Europe or North America shall be

⁴⁹ International Security Assistance Force (2010).

⁵⁰ McChrystal, “ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance” (2009), 3.

considered an attack against them all.”⁵¹ America’s military attacks on al Qaeda and its Taliban protectors was valid to many on an emotional level, even if its consequences had not been thoroughly analyzed and anticipated on a rational level. More than eight years later, the continued validity of US strategy in Afghanistan was far less emotionally charged or rationally explicit. The connection between Obama’s strategic objective of continuing to disrupt al Qaeda-style terrorism and the operational methods espoused by COIN doctrine was based more on belief than fact.

By 2009, the confidence of many American elites in both the stated end and the professed means of the strategy no longer depended on the undeniable sting of past events but on a contested pattern of future events. The risk of terrorism was difficult to appreciate, since the emotional fear of violence against Americans could not be weighed against the rational fact that those same citizens were at a much greater risk of drowning in their bathtub than being killed in a terrorist attack.⁵² Continued military intervention in Afghanistan could not guarantee safety, since threats from different quarters persisted and there were plausible reasons other than military action that might explain why the United States had not suffered a second major attack.⁵³ A successful Taliban insurgency would not necessarily expand safe havens for al Qaeda, since the relationship had cost the Taliban control of the country in 2001.⁵⁴ While concessions to the Taliban or their outright victory promised other bad outcomes—notably the severe oppression of millions of Afghans and a precipitous loss of prestige that could bury the concept of American

⁵¹ Lord G. Robertson (2001).

⁵² Mueller and Stewart (2010).

⁵³ Boyd, Dunn, and Scouras (2009).

⁵⁴ Barrett, et al. (2009).

exceptionalism—the pragmatic Obama had distanced his ultimate war justification from such fuzzy ideals. Although the intuitive validity of answering the violence of 9/11 had justified almost any manner of response to the attack, the validity of the strategy now demanded greater harmony between purpose and method.

Sadly, COIN as discursive shorthand for the US strategy tended to increase rather than decrease discord between policy makers and their agents in Afghanistan—primarily because the doctrine, at its heart, lacked a positive objective. The need for *counterinsurgency* presumed that insurgents had “seized and exploited the initiative.”⁵⁵ The government’s objectives were reactive and negative. COIN aimed “to eliminate as many causes of the insurgency as feasible.”⁵⁶ Because insurgents would use “all available tools” to continue their offensive and increase their control, the counterinsurgent needed to respond comprehensively. Thus COIN represented nothing less than the collection of “military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic action taken by a government to defeat an insurgency”—a definition so comprehensive as to be essentially meaningless as a guide to effective action.⁵⁷

In their critique of COIN doctrine, David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith trace the distinction between positive assertions of ideology by violent Islamists and the broad-based material response encouraged by Nagl and other “neo-COIN” advocates:

... neo-COIN thinking fails to address the political implications of an intransigently held ideology because it considers it unnecessary to articulate a defense of the liberal-democratic

⁵⁵ US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

values it ostensibly fights to secure. Instead, neo-COIN focuses on technique as this offers an apolitical approach to conflict where practitioner-commentators demonstrate their purported analytical neutrality.⁵⁸

The heart of this observation—that COIN doctrine is an incomplete bridge between definable outcomes and identifiable actions—rings true, but its specific allegation is not entirely correct. COIN doctrine is not *apolitical*—that is, “not interested in or concerned with politics”—because it insists that political power is “the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.”⁵⁹ Instead, the doctrine is *pan*-political. It invests every aspect of interaction among the threatened state, the population, and the insurgents with significance, thereby complicating operational and tactical choices by validating endless interpretations. Because COIN can encompass everyone’s hopes and fears about planned action, it is not a particularly useful device for conveying specific meaning to the counterinsurgents or those observing them.

Interpreting COIN: Expedient, Expansive, Normative, or Relative?

Elites interpreted the practice of COIN in Afghanistan along the fault lines of available time and appropriate standards. In general, those closest to the domestic pressures of a restless electorate and an impulsive news media favored *expediency*—doing as little as necessary as quickly as possible—while those operating in Afghanistan argued for *expansive* approaches that would trade political patience for more durable solutions to large and complex problems. Elites also split over *normative* and *relative* interpretations of underlying values. The normative approach measured success in terms of

⁵⁸ Jones and Smith (2010).

⁵⁹ US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 2. The definition of *apolitical* is taken from Oxford English Dictionary (2010).

“liberal principles” that were assumed to be “shared by all,” emphasizing that governments fighting insurgents must model these principles.⁶⁰ Those taking a relative position were skeptical of the value or feasibility of inculcating liberal ideals in the cities and villages of Afghanistan, and they therefore evaluated progress by varying standards. Expedient relativists handled value judgments rhetorically and politically, often defining their position on the right side of valence issues such as opposition to corruption or excess of any kind.

Expansive relativists defined progress “against outcomes for, and norms of, local populations,” which they associated first and foremost with meeting the immediate needs of communities for security and aid.⁶¹

By 2009, it was difficult for government elites responsible for improving the deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan to adopt both a normative and an expedient understanding of the strategy. The exception to this rule may have been the German government, which yielded to the country’s painful history and constitutional constraints by characterizing Afghanistan as “like a war, but ... not a war” or “a development aid mission in uniform,” in the words of two German legislators.⁶² In the opinion of one the country’s leading reporters in Afghanistan, the lack of “full-time correspondents” there obscured the full scope of German involvement, with the result that public opinion about the conflict was “dominated by stereotypes and uninformed op-ed writers.”⁶³ Once public denials about an air strike in Kunduz led to the resignations of the German defense minister and military chief of staff, closer scrutiny effectively

⁶⁰ Tadjbakhsh (2009), 636.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Whitlock, “German Lawmakers Question Involvement in Afghan Airstrike” (2009).

⁶³ Email response to author from anonymous German reporter, 29 September 2010. The reporter wished to remain anonymous in order to provide his opinion of his colleagues.

demolished the political fiction that progress in Afghanistan was sufficiently liberal and painless.⁶⁴

Reporters and academics who were free to point out contradictions between the strategy's aspirations and pace without having to resolve them were therefore the elites most likely to take a normative-expedient stance. "We've gotten ourselves into a complex war in which we need the reform or transformation" of Pakistan and Afghanistan "in order to succeed," concluded Frank Anderson, president of Middle East Policy Council, in January 2010. "The Taliban and our other enemies do not need to transform their society or ours to succeed."⁶⁵ The COIN strategy implied an ambitious liberal agenda that Anderson considered "far too complex and far too costly to succeed in the time we have available."⁶⁶ Seven months later, a *New York Times* editorial summarized the newspaper's recent reporting on Afghanistan, wondering "whether, at this late date, there is a chance of even minimal success" for tasks such as ensuring "adequate governance" by "honest officials" and providing "aid" and "jobs" to former insurgents.⁶⁷

In opposition to these skeptics were those who argued that the impossibility of improving conditions in Afghanistan rested on a faulty both-and proposition. Regional problems could be solved, they just could not be solved on the cheap. As a Marine colonel in Helmand put it to McChrystal, "I can give you a slow win, General, or a fast loss. A fast win isn't possible."⁶⁸ From this perspective, success required an expansive strategy with consistent values, but

⁶⁴ BBC News, "German minister Franz Josef Jung resigns over raid" (November 2009).

⁶⁵ Riedel, et al. (2010), 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁷ *New York Times* editorial (2010).

⁶⁸ West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 220.

coalition elites predictably split over the relevant values. Among Americans and Europeans, the division was largely a structural one between civilian officials endorsing aid programs conforming to liberal norms and military officials backing security programs bounded by the limitations of local conditions and culture. Competing proposals to provide electricity to the city of Kandahar illustrate the differences between the two sides.

In the spring of 2010, ISAF military officials advanced a plan to spend \$200 million on additional generators and diesel fuel to provide electricity to Afghanistan's second-largest city, soon to become the focus of intensive military operations. Civilian elites from the US Embassy and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) opposed the move, which they argued would increase Afghan dependence on a level of electrical capacity that the government and economy could not sustain on its own. A better solution was for Kandahar's electric utility to improve its collection of fees, increase the efficiency of power production through USAID's local green-power initiatives, and complete frustrated plans to rebuild a hydroelectric power plant at Helmand's Kajaki Dam. Furthermore, the focus on electricity missed the big picture, since "Kandahar residents are more concerned about the lack of a credible justice system and the dearth of unemployment."⁶⁹

The position of US civilian agencies in this case amounted to a fairly concise argument for the expansive-normative view of COIN. The question of local electrical supply was answered best by big investments in durable infrastructure that would serve many communities and by enforcing high standards of bureaucratic efficiency and accountability. On a grander scale,

⁶⁹ Chandrasekaran, "U.S. military, diplomats at odds over how to resolve Kandahar's electricity woes" (2010).

keeping the lights on for a few more months did nothing to solve truly important social problems like the availability of jobs and justice. US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry linked Kandahar's energy problem to his organization's specific view of COIN doctrine when he told the State Department that the military's proposal was "unlikely to have the counterinsurgency impact desired"—meaning it failed to liberalize Kandahar's government and economy over the long term.⁷⁰

Although civilian critics accused them of cynical expediency, military officers and their advisers did not dispute the need for expansive programs similar to the ones urged by the embassy and USAID. However, Kandahar "is not about development—it's about counterinsurgency," one ISAF official declared, again invoking the magic word in defense of an expansive-relativist interpretation of the mission. In the military's view, liberal norms needed to take a back seat to the more pressing concerns of Kandaharis, summed up by a local carpet merchant who told the *Washington Post*, "If there was more electricity, there would be more security." Big aid projects could not proceed without sufficient security—particularly the Kajaki Dam, where, as one NATO adviser noted, "you'll get killed if you try to drive up there." The better bet was to combine more security with quick fixes to local grievances to build momentum toward grander social improvements. After eight years of strategic drift, progress in Kandahar needed to start at the local level. From ISAF's perspective, it was "time we helped the people inside the city."⁷¹

As this example suggests, differences of opinion about the objective of an expansive strategy in Afghanistan derived from two visions of legitimacy. The

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ All quotes *ibid*.

normative one was based on the top-down primacy of a liberal, bureaucratic, and mostly urbanized state. Operations such as the one in Marjah diverted attention and resources to strategic backwaters. As one Washington official asked the *Washington Post* a month into Operation *Moshtarak*, “Why aren’t all 20,000 Marines in the population belts around Kandahar city right now? It’s [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar’s capital.”⁷² Counter the insurgency with a more centralized effort to stabilize and liberalize the larger cities and towns instead, and the outskirts would follow. As Eikenberry put the case to Secretary of State Clinton, the war’s “strategic purposes” were “Afghanizing and civilianizing government functions here.”⁷³ This could not be accomplished without a “political ruling class that provides an overarching national identity that transcends local affiliations and provides reliable partnership” or “the political will or capacity to carry out basic tasks of governance.”⁷⁴ Success in Afghanistan depended on people in Kabul and Kandahar behaving less like tribal chiefs and more like national leaders.

The relative approach to legitimacy was much more bottom-up, charismatic, and rural, influenced by the romanticized tradition of counterinsurgency from Lawrence of Arabia to combined action platoons in Vietnam.⁷⁵ Success was a result of many hard but insightful men venturing into the deserts, mountains, and villages, first to earn the grudging respect of strangers and then to help them fight for their future on their own cultural terms. The determination to persevere in small places where the insurgents

⁷² Chandrasekaran, “At Afghan outpost, Marines gone rogue or leading the fight against counterinsurgency?” (2010).

⁷³ Eikenberry (2009), 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁵ Lawrence (reprinted 1991) and West, *The Village* (reprinted 2003).

were strongest inspired resistance to the rebels elsewhere. “We’ve taken a grim, tough place, a place where there was no hope, and we’ve given it a future,” Nicholson explained by way of defending the presence of his Marine units in Marjah and other rural districts of Helmand Province. “You cannot fix Kandahar without fixing Helmand. The insurgency there draws support from the insurgency here.”⁷⁶

These different interpretations of COIN among military and civilian officials on the ground in Afghanistan—combined with the political and economic liabilities of an open-ended commitment—prompted a more pragmatic approach. If one camp was considered too liberal, another too local, and both wanted too much time and money, the safe course was to split the difference. The senior military and civilian officials directly involved in the administration’s 2009 strategy review therefore urged moderation in all things. Gates made the point most memorably when testifying before Congress in January of that year: “Afghanistan is the fourth- or fifth-poorest country in the world, and if we set ourselves the objective of creating some sort of Central Asian Valhalla over there, we will lose.”⁷⁷ The objective was to keep the mission as short and simple as possible by avoiding the temptations to remake Afghanistan in the Western mold while encouraging Afghans to be just Western enough to avoid offending the liberal sensibilities of many of their international supporters.

The key rhetorical task for an expedient and relative way out of Afghanistan was to decouple the strategic shorthand—COIN—from grandiose ideas of social transformation. Defending his decision to limit the number of

⁷⁶ Chandrasekaran, “At Afghan outpost, Marines gone rogue or leading the fight against counterinsurgency?” (2010).

⁷⁷ Cooper and Shanker, “Obama to step up battle in Afghanistan, aides say” (2009).

military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had questioned the proposition “that it’s possible for one nation to go in and build another nation... I think people of their nation have to be the ones that build their nation, and I think the task of other countries is to try to create an environment where that’s possible.”⁷⁸ For many elites inside and outside Washington, *nation building* was a red flag, “a term of opprobrium in public debate.”⁷⁹ Equating COIN with nation building invested the doctrine with connotations of extravagant generosity toward undeserving foreigners and the dilution of the American fighting spirit for the purpose of what COIN champion David Kilcullen, with a tin ear turned toward a significant segment of his military audience, had called “armed social work” or “armed propaganda.”⁸⁰

McChrystal made a point similar to Rumsfeld’s when CNN’s Christiane Amanpour asked him about the expansiveness of the American strategy shortly after the completion of the 2009 review:

Amanpour: Why do you think Americans are so queasy about the term *nation building*? Because, frankly, the March [2009] speech that President Obama laid out was about nation building. Your report was about how one needed to have nation building. Now, you can call it anything: state, nation building, security building, stability building. But isn’t that vital to successes?

McChrystal: I think it is, but I also think it’s ultimately an Afghan responsibility. They are going to need a lot of assistance and partnership from the international community. And I think we need to offer that to them, but we also need to remember that

⁷⁸ Rumsfeld (2005).

⁷⁹ Dobbins (2010).

⁸⁰ Kilcullen, “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency” (2006), 8. Ricks, *The Gamble* (2009), 142.

the responsibility ultimately allies with Afghans. We must enable them, but not do it for them.⁸¹

Likewise, senior civilian officials in the Obama administration who otherwise distanced themselves from anything associated with Rumsfeld shared his rhetorical preference in this regard, as evidenced by a reflexive rejection of the word *counterinsurgency* on the chance that it would imply a license to nation-build. “This is not a COIN strategy,” Vice President Joseph Biden declared in December 2009 on MSNBC. “This is not ‘go out and occupy the whole country.’”⁸²

By emphasizing the strategy’s distinction from COIN in both its expediency and its deference to the relative responsibilities and capabilities of Afghans, officials attempted to mute the concerns of elites at the operational level about the scope of US obligations and endless Afghan dependence on American protection and aid. Expedient-relativism thus considered COIN *a la carte*. It accepted some aspects of the doctrine that appealed to most elites—such as Afghan self-reliance—while rejecting those that appealed to few or none—such as a large, long-term American military presence. Critics concerned that this expediency was a compromise that killed operational effectiveness could easily parody this position as no position at all, as West did in this summary of the administration’s public pronouncements:

Are we nation building? Yes (Mullen). No (Obama). Are we pursuing a strategy of counterinsurgency aimed at winning over the support of the Pashtun people? Yes (McChrystal). No (Biden). Are we withdrawing a large number of troops in mid-2011? Yes (Biden). No (Gates). Is Pakistan committed to helping or

⁸¹ McChrystal, author’s transcript of interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour (December 2009).

⁸² Chandrasekaran, “Differing views of new Afghanistan strategy” (2009).

impeding? Secretary of State Clinton implied that it was both, while rhetorically asking, “Are we to believe that no Pakistani official of any rank knows where Osama bin Laden is hiding?” Do we have a real plan for transitioning the war to the Afghans? No senior official has issued a statement for the record.⁸³

Although it was easy to criticize the administration’s apparent contradictions in this fashion, the uncertain rhetoric reflected the real difficulties of civilian and military agents directing a multinational operation with a structural complexity that all but assured there would be no common definition of the problem or the solution. As the theoretic underpinnings of critical discourse predict, senior officials responsible for explaining the strategy to second-tier elites found themselves mediating between groups with various individual and organizational interpretations of the plan.

McChrystal’s positions on the reliability of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the July 2011 withdrawal date—the first mostly a question of appropriateness and the second mostly a question of consequence—are illuminating in this regard. In March 2010, McChrystal discussed his partnership with Karzai with a group of leading American newspaper and magazine columnists:

I think I’ve got a great relationship with President Karzai. He’s shown great leadership to me and partnership as I consider in many ways I work for him in helping to prosecute this campaign. But it’s something that is extraordinarily important, again, on a personal and organizational level. But there are stresses and strains to it every day, because if you assume that two countries or even two people try to build a relationship, we then have to remember that on the other side there are constituencies and pressures that want to pull you away... As you know, all the coalition partners here have domestic politics, and they have things that they’ve got to balance out. On the one hand you’re trying to reassure them of commitment and resolve. On the other

⁸³ West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 191.

hand you're trying to work through realities you may have to deal with. Everybody does, and I think the senior players all understand that, but it makes trust-building and maintenance a constant task, and it makes the ability to communicate as clearly as possible a constant task...⁸⁴

In other words, true ownership of the strategy by the Afghan government precluded the idea of applying strict norms to Karzai's tolerance of election rigging, government graft, friendly relations with Iran, or other offenses against liberal standards. The relationship with Karzai needed to take the form of a dialogue on the appropriateness of his and his critics' behavior in light of the Afghan president's own complicated interests and elite constituencies.

Two months later, McChrystal assured European reporters in much the same way that it was possible to take a more expedient but relative view of operations with respect to the July 2011 timetable for initial US troop withdrawals:

I think in that first period, you could say it's a year, what we needed to do is convince people that we have a very effective effort now ... and that effort is growing. It doesn't have to have worked. It doesn't have to be successful. What we need to be proving to people is that we are making absolute progress. Because as they see that, I think that's what builds confidence in the Afghan people and the international community to support this.⁸⁵

From this perspective, Obama's timetable had established a consequence—a drawdown of military forces a year hence—that created urgency missing from the eight previous years of Afghan and international efforts. It provided sufficient time to accomplish *something*, although the facts on the ground

⁸⁴ McChrystal, author's transcript of roundtable discussion with columnist accompanying the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (March 2010).

⁸⁵ McChrystal, author's transcript of roundtable with NATO media opinion leader tour participants (May 2010).

required the admission that no one could expect the strategy to accomplish everything necessary in such a short period.

The subtlety of McChrystal's operational approach on these matters of appropriateness and consequence was understandable, even admirable in its attempt to bring together senior and mid-level elites. Still, the credibility of this effort was threatened by an operational doctrine that accommodated the absolute and divisive inclinations of opposing elites. The doctrine asserted that "the primary objective of any COIN operation is to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government."⁸⁶ Since the flawed results of the 2009 presidential election shocked liberal consciences, it followed that the strategy could not succeed unless Karzai was replaced. Yet the doctrine also said that "all foreign armies are seen as interlopers or occupiers; the sooner the main effort can transition to [host nation] institutions, without unacceptable degradation, the better."⁸⁷ So letting the election stand as an *acceptable* degradation might be better than Western political intervention—a realistic and even culturally sensitive departure from liberal norms in the interest of expediency. Then again, the doctrine insisted that insurgencies "are protracted by nature," and "COIN operations always demand considerable expenditures of time and resources."⁸⁸ Moral concessions and timetables meant to expedite the transition of responsibility to the Afghans therefore might work against that outcome, forcing the coalition to accept conditions that were not durable.

By encompassing expedient, expansive, normative, and relative approaches to success in Afghanistan, COIN doctrine accurately reflected the

⁸⁶ US Army and Marine Corps (2007), 37.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 43.

contested nature of its validity. What the doctrine did not do was present a coherent, prioritized plan for action that could be discussed productively. Officials could call upon COIN to say that security, governance, or economic development in urban or rural areas was the key to Afghanistan's future; that the United States was interested primarily in killing or negotiating with insurgents; or that the American effort was finite or enduring. Unfortunately, elites could make the same array of arguments by declaring that COIN—at least as misguided opponents understood it—was *not* the mission in Afghanistan. COIN became the default strategy in Afghanistan in part because it continued to dodge the questions left unanswered during the 2009 strategy review, keeping the validity of any and all potential US actions in a state of suspended animation rather than attempting to resolve them.

Internalized Dissent and Hidden Progress: Barriers to Equity in COIN Discourse

Since it was exceptionally difficult for leaders to convince lower-level military and civilian officials that the strategy was inherently valid in the short run, the pragmatic flexibility—or, less charitably, the essential vacuity—of COIN doctrine was not a clear liability if it promoted greater equity in elite discourse. To some extent the doctrine accomplished this objective. Most commanders believed the proper execution of COIN required dialogue between senior leaders and their local agents and between those agents and local Afghans—in part because all strategies require some level of explication, in part because COIN was especially complex and counterintuitive. McChrystal therefore devoted

considerable time and resources to establishing a dialogue with his troops on the practical application of COIN, as discussed above.

Perhaps more importantly, COIN motivated parallel efforts at the theater level to expand ownership of the strategy among Afghans by giving them access to information and some say in the direction of operations. As McChrystal explained to Afghan journalists in April 2010:

Asking the people is part of the strategy. Before we went in to Marjah, we coordinated with the people for a number of months, with leaders. We asked leaders who were already outside the town to meet, and we asked leaders from inside the district of Marjah to meet as well, because we wanted their thoughts, we wanted their guidance, and we wanted them to ask us to do the operation... We believe that if this effort is really being done on behalf of the Afghan people, then we need to ask the Afghan people what they want—and how they want the operation, if they want the operation, do they want better security, those things, and get a sense of that...

Security at the end of the day is for the people, but it's also by the people. They will help provide that security. So I think that engagement is critical.⁸⁹

With guidance to engage, Afghan politicians and coalition commanders made themselves available to Afghan community leaders, as the outreach in Marjah by officials such as Mangal, Zahir, Nicholson, and Ghouri demonstrated. These leaders structured military and aid operations to address some of the concerns raised in their consultations with elders.

At the national level, McChrystal accompanied Karzai to *shuras* in several cities and towns in the spring of 2010, where the Afghan president opened himself to public criticism and defended his government. At a meeting with approximately 1,000 community representatives from Kandahar Province in April 2010, Karzai reversed his recent accusations of foreign meddling by

⁸⁹ McChrystal, author's transcript of roundtable with Afghan media (April 2010).

accepting blame for his government's failings, but he also encouraged prominent Kandaharis to admit their own culpability. "Every tribe wants to protect their own thief," Karzai said. "We need to stop doing that so that we can fix the country." Amid strongly voiced concerns about the threat of planned coalition operations to local lives and property, Karzai told the elders "we will not conduct the operations in Kandahar until you say we can."⁹⁰

Such engagement bears more than a trace of political pandering. But by 2010, even pandering represented progress. At least now, McChrystal and other officers were trying to answer questions about the proper use of military personnel and economic resources that their neglected predecessors had been forced to defer. Karzai was at least asserting authority over the nation rather than cultivating his reputation as the insular "mayor of Kabul," thereby setting an example for provincial and district governors who expanded their outreach to local Afghans.⁹¹ COIN doctrine combined with increased international commitments and greater media scrutiny to broaden the public conversation about the strategy.

However, just as elites could summon COIN to support opposing arguments about the validity of their preferred actions, the doctrine introduced assumptions that resisted even modest efforts to extend the equity of discourse. For a significant number of national security elites, there was no need for inclusive discussions of the appropriateness and consequences of COIN doctrine in Afghanistan. The authority of the doctrine had been settled by the American experience in Iraq. When it became apparent that the fortunes of the Iraq surge had not placed COIN above persistent if not terribly constructive

⁹⁰ All quotes from Abawi, "Karzai seeks tribal support for military operation" (2010).

⁹¹ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 68.

dissent, advocates were thrown back on the need to prove the doctrine's validity rather than assume it. Such proof implied extraordinary levels of achievement in local security, economic welfare, or public opinions about governance. The coalition's most visible short-term achievements tended to be those that were the least transparent because of institutionalized secrecy and the difficulties of collecting and interpreting the comprehensive data associated with a strategy of social transformation.

The Petraeus Narrative of Internal Dissent and the Assumed

Authority of COIN. "Afghanistan is not Iraq," Bruce Riedel, the chief architect of Obama's March 2009 Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, said in January 2010. "Let's not refight the surge arguments of 2007 and 2008 over Afghanistan."⁹² His point was that Afghanistan and Iraq posed unique strategic problems requiring unique solutions. Many military and civilian analysts took a different view. As RAND's James Dobbins argued in *Foreign Affairs* as late as October 2010, "no one seriously argues that counterinsurgency tactics are not necessary to resist insurgencies."⁹³ Citing the think tank's study of successful COIN practices in 30 recent civil wars, Dobbins assured skeptics that the "good practices highlighted are generally those laid out in the U.S. military's Counterinsurgency Field Manual. The bad practices include an excessive reliance on search-and-destroy missions, the employment of repressive measures, and an insensitivity to civilian casualties"—all things, it did not need to be added, that a force uniformly adhering to the new COIN doctrine had left behind.⁹⁴ The argument about the validity of COIN as a solution to

⁹² Riedel, et al. (2010), 28.

⁹³ Dobbins (2010).

⁹⁴ Ibid. The study Dobbins cites is Paul, Clarke, and Grill (2010).

Afghanistan's problems was over, as far as Dobbins was concerned. Although "one can legitimately argue for reducing the United States' commitment to the Afghan war and for shifting more of the burden onto local forces," he said, "it makes no sense to denigrate the tactics and techniques best designed to counter an insurgency."⁹⁵

The assertion of the historical authority of COIN doctrine had many roots, including running counterfactual debates between soldier-scholars such as Nagl and Gian Gentile about the chances of winning the Vietnam War through the proper application of COIN.⁹⁶ The most recent and convincing case that COIN was the best available strategy for Afghanistan, however, came from the Iraq War, where General David Petraeus had resuscitated America's fortunes with a surge modeled on the COIN field manual he conceived. More than anything else, the Petraeus narrative was a discourse of dissent, offered as evidence that COIN doctrine was the purified product of hard lessons on the battlefield and the critical deflation of antiquated military conventions. The fact that the doctrine emerged against the resistance of hidebound generals and arrogant or squeamish politicians—all of whom had failed the nation by miring it in a pointless conflict—was further testament to its authority.

In its broad outlines, the Petraeus narrative begins within the unraveling of Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, in which one of the "enduring questions ... was whether the U.S. uniformed military had asserted itself strongly enough on challenging civilian officials' views that it felt were ill-considered or downright risky."⁹⁷ President George W. Bush and his senior advisers discouraged

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Bacevich, "The Petraeus Doctrine" (2008).

⁹⁷ L. Robinson (2008), 12.

dissent within the ranks, seeing Iraq as a case of inadequate explanation rather than stunted deliberation. The feeling within the administration, in the words of former National Security Council official Peter D. Feaver, was “We’ve got the right strategy, but we’re losing the public debate, because people don’t understand our strategy.”⁹⁸ The gulf between government rhetoric and reality became stark enough to spur junior officers’ disgust with “colonels and generals” who “keep holding on to flawed concepts,” which in turn prompted a “revolt of the generals” against Rumsfeld in 2006.⁹⁹ Pressures from the bottom and the top of the military’s leadership hierarchy divided institutional opinion on the validity of the Iraq strategy. For “the first time in the war,” Thomas Ricks notes, “the Bush administration could no longer blandly state that it was following the advice of the military. By late 2006, there simply no longer was a consensus view to follow.”¹⁰⁰

Although many officials worked behind the scenes to effect a change in the Iraq strategy, Petraeus—who had risen in the ranks despite snubbing the Army’s typical career path in order to earn his doctorate at Princeton University—became the public hero of the crisis. He assembled a group of equally disrespected military intellectuals who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan to draft the COIN field manual. This inclusive effort was a critical exercise drawing on the wisdom and experience of “not just military officers but representatives from the CIA and the State Department, academics, human rights advocates, even a select group of high-profile journalists.”¹⁰¹ Armed with this doctrine as the foundation of a fresh approach to a failing effort, Petraeus

⁹⁸ Quoted in Ricks, *The Gamble* (2009), 13.

⁹⁹ Rotmann, Tohn, and Wharton (2009), 40-42.

¹⁰⁰ Ricks, *The Gamble* (2009), 57.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

was enlisted to command the operation in January 2007, outmaneuvering more powerful opponents within Congress, the Pentagon, and the White House along the way.

By appointing Petraeus to command all forces in Iraq, Ricks concludes that

the Bush administration was turning the war over to the opposition inside the U.S. military... [T]he president and his aides selected pragmatists and skeptics, especially the experts whose advice had been disregarded and even denounced during the run-up to the war. Some had been opponents of the war. Most were critics of the current policy, and disillusioned, in the best sense of that word, that they had been stripped of the false assumptions that had hamstrung the U.S. war effort for years.¹⁰²

Once in charge, Petraeus demonstrated the same cunning and critical approach to implementing COIN as he did in reviving the doctrine for a new era of American wars. In particular, he surrounded himself with “realists or even skeptics who agreed that the war was not going well and admitted the possibility that it was too late to change the outcome.” These military officers and civilians “served a critical ‘red-tem’ function to challenge established policy and offer up contrary ideas,” including proposals that knowingly contradicted Petraeus.¹⁰³ The general’s “intellect, leadership, and relentless nature” got results.¹⁰⁴ By the end of 2007, insurgent attacks in Iraq were down 60 percent over the previous six months, and civilian deaths were 75 percent lower than year before—levels of violence not seen since the spring of 2005, when Iraq’s

¹⁰² Ibid., 128.

¹⁰³ L. Robinson (2008), 99.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 348.

nascent government “began to chart a sectarian course” that ignited Sunni and Shia rage.¹⁰⁵

In its contours, the Petraeus narrative is the story of a revolution than began within the US Army, with ripples spreading outward through sympathetic channels into other military services, the Department of Defense, the Bush administration, sectors of the diplomatic and intelligence communities, and researchers and reporters specializing in national security. But leading theories of military innovation suggest that COIN doctrine’s acceptance was at best a partial step toward changing the way the United States approaches future wars. More dangerously, the idea that the Army had reformed *itself* despite the obstacles thrown in its way by political and military naysayers served to exclude potential sources of greater innovation or limit their autonomy in strategic debates.

In his seminal study *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, Barry R. Posen contends that in “times of relative international calm, organizational dynamics” of military services “are allowed to flourish. But in times of threat, the actions of both statesmen and, to a lesser extent, soldiers will tend to override these dynamics.”¹⁰⁶ Military organizations “struggle for *independence* from legitimate authority” and “place a premium on predictability, stability, and certainty. These values are inimical to innovation.”¹⁰⁷ The pattern of service insularity and complacency can be broken only by “doctrinal innovation,” caused by failure in war, or more comprehensive “military innovation,” caused by “civilian

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 323.

¹⁰⁶ Posen (1984), 40.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 45-46.

intervention.”¹⁰⁸ “Failure and civilian intervention often go hand in hand,” Posen says, requiring civilians driving change to “find sources of military knowledge”—often in the form of maverick officers.¹⁰⁹

In opposition to Posen, Stephen Peter Rosen argues in *Winning the Next War* that civilian leaders “do not appear to have had a major role in deciding which new military capabilities to develop, either in peacetime or in war, although they did help protect or accelerate innovations already in progress.”¹¹⁰ Rosen gives much more credit for peacetime innovation to “senior military officers with traditional credentials” who respond to “a structural change in the security environment” to “create a new promotion pathway for junior officers practicing a new way of war.”¹¹¹ He is skeptical that militaries can truly innovate—as opposed to simply reforming bad practices—under the pressures and time constraints of war, and he suggests that fundamental change during a conflict is “most effective when associated with a redefinition of measures of strategic effectiveness employed by the military organization.”¹¹² Whereas change for Posen requires a shift in the balance of power from military insiders to outsiders, Rosen attributes change to a more gradual institutional process that brings the outsiders inside.

The surface of the Petraeus narrative flashes with enough elements of Posen and Rosen’s arguments to provide an authentic sheen of innovation. As Posen predicts, evident failures in Iraq provided an impetus for change within the Bush administration, while Petraeus and his circle were sympathetic

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹¹⁰ Rosen (1991), 255.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 251.

¹¹² Ibid.

mavericks in the sense of bucking the anti-intellectual, blood-and-guts stereotype of Army officers. At the same time, the traditional Army began to adapt itself as Rosen argues it must, placing a higher stock in junior officers who conformed to the Petraeus mold and expanding its definition of strategic effectiveness from one strictly concerned with killing the enemy to one interested in setting the conditions for lasting social stability.

In the end, however, COIN doctrine did not produce the military's forced acceptance of a civilian-crafted strategy or military consensus on a new way of fighting wars. COIN did redefine strategic effectiveness in terms of protecting civilians, but this shift was far from complete—many argued for a traditional focus on killing the enemy—and difficult to operationalize. More than anything, the ascendancy of COIN doctrine simply reversed rather than resolved disparities in organizational power between outsiders and insiders, while refusing to offer useful new measures of strategic success.

The history of the Iraq surge belies the idea that COIN doctrine was the product of civilian intervention in a failed military strategy. Whether or not one agrees with Ricks that the surge represented an abdication of civilian responsibility for strategy—or with Feaver that Bush facilitated the strategy's development—the administration fed the Petraeus narrative by lionizing the general.¹¹³ Bush branded Petraeus as the face of the war by naming him 150 times in presidential speeches during the first six months of 2007.¹¹⁴ To proponents of the Petraeus narrative, the credit given to the new commander in Iraq was a vindication of military professionalism. Prior to the invasion of Iraq

¹¹³ Feaver offers an alternative to the explanation of the surge decision popularized by Ricks and others in "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision" (2011). Ricks responds in "A Feaver-ish take on the surge in Iraq" (2011).

¹¹⁴ Ricks, *The Gamble* (2009), 123.

in 2003, the administration had spurned the advice of General Eric Shinseki, the Army Chief of Staff, to provide several hundred thousand soldiers for post-conflict stabilization.¹¹⁵ Bush was paying that bill belatedly, in a way that emphasized the change was more operational than strategic and thus manageable under the authority of a military commander.

However politically useful that perception was as a deflection of responsibility to military leadership, it was a fairly accurate assessment of the scope of the surge. What passed for a change in strategy in Iraq did not extend much beyond the typical operational and tactical matters for which field commanders are often responsible: troop strength, dispositions, the pace of operations, and interpreting existing moral and legal constraints on the use of force.

As Linda Robinson notes, the “U.S. debate both in public and inside the administration centered overwhelmingly on the limited question of U.S. troop levels rather than the more fundamental political question of whether U.S. and Iraqi goals were aligned, and if not, how they might be brought into alignment.”¹¹⁶ Petraeus and his backers offered no real answers to this question beyond their confidence that US troops could alleviate political tensions rather than aggravate them, as most military leaders feared at the time.¹¹⁷ His main achievement was to support a military option that differed from the administration’s failing plan while also distinguishing itself from the alternatives posed by Bush’s opponents.

¹¹⁵ Ricks, *Fiasco* (2006), 96-100.

¹¹⁶ L. Robinson (2008), 29.

¹¹⁷ Ricks, *The Gamble* (2009), 92-93 and 113-114.

Liberals generally wanted to withdraw, throwing responsibility onto Iraqi forces through accelerated training. Centrists “advocated getting smaller and staying longer,” chipping away at security and development for years from forward operating bases outside population centers or outposts within them.¹¹⁸ The surge presented Bush with the risky but ideologically attractive prospect of going in big in order to go home—a deft political navigation among unattractive options for escaping a bad situation. This was no small feat for Petraeus and his allies, but it was a far cry from a strategic innovation relevant to cases other than Iraq.

While the intellectual arguments for the surge were brewing, parallel trends in defense scholarship helped invest the decision with a sense of historic inevitability rather than mere political expediency. In doing so, military and academic partisans exploited the currency of COIN to elevate the importance of ground warfare and the occupation of territory while marginalizing proponents of military targeting through air, sea, or special operations. This development also helped to deny equity to military professionals with potential theories of victory other than COIN by questioning their authority. Having failed the nation once in its time of need, those who would question COIN’s effectiveness could not be trusted to fail again.

Since 9/11, a growing number of defense experts argued that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan rebuked the US military’s lingering obsession with transformative technology and risk-free warfare, the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) embodied by Air Force and Navy weapons and information systems that had monopolized Pentagon budgets in the interest of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 149.

observing and attacking the enemy from afar in cooperation with a minimal number of highly trained ground forces. Modern warfare, as Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations concluded, demanded “close combat capability” and the occupation of ground by the “dismounted infantry” forces of the Army and Marines.¹¹⁹ But the defense reforms proposed by the RMA’s critics extended beyond rebalancing force structure to re-envisioning the military’s purpose. US forces’ ability to fight needed to be augmented with their capacity to build because, as the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick Kagan contended, “the most pressing problem facing the United States today is the task of reconstructing defeated former enemies while conducting counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations in those states.”¹²⁰ Civilian opponents of the RMA therefore lined up behind current and former Army officers to push through the urgent changes to US operations in Iraq that Rumsfeld’s Pentagon had resisted. Biddle and Kagan, for instance, supported retired General Jack Keane in making the case for the Iraq surge to Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.¹²¹

Arguably, this collaboration of Army and academic dissenters worked to good effect in Iraq. What was disconcerting was how quickly what Ricks astutely called the gamble in Iraq became a firm basis for asserting the approach’s innate authority as a solution to other wars. In part, the shift was implicit in the doctrine, which adopted the premise that most “enemies either do not try to defeat the United States with conventional operations or do not

¹¹⁹ Biddle (2004), 204.

¹²⁰ Kagan (2006), 364.

¹²¹ L. Robinson (2008), 30-37.

limit themselves to purely military means.”¹²² As Andrew Bacevich observed, the doctrine assumed that “the Army (like it or not) is entering an era in which armed conflict will be protracted, ambiguous, and continuous—with the application of force becoming a lesser part of the soldier’s repertoire.”¹²³ This view of US national security aligned with the interests and sensibilities of officials inside and outside government whose concerns with the human dimension of war had been sidelined by the RMA. Regional specialists, aid experts, diplomats, human rights advocates, and others who were largely irrelevant to high-tech warfare could be enlisted to develop and promote COIN as a smarter, more humane way to fight the wars that were most likely to characterize the twenty-first century.

Although COIN doctrine by way of the Petraeus narrative was inclusive in the sense that it empowered elites who had been left out of previous national security discussions, it resulted in the exclusion of former defense insiders who were slow to embrace the new orthodoxy. The civilian advisers who participated in McChrystal’s 60-day assessment in the summer of 2009 illustrate how the Iraq model worked simultaneously to expand and limit discourse on strategy. Between 2003 and 2006, academics had to fulminate in books and journals against Rumsfeld and the conventional Army’s failures in Iraq, while the Bush administration searched for options and Petraeus honed COIN doctrine in the hinterlands of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In contrast, McChrystal invited civilian advisers to Kabul shortly after taking command, providing them with an immediate opportunity to influence a change in operations.

¹²² US Army and Marine Corps (2007), li.

¹²³ Bacevich, “The Petraeus Doctrine” (2008).

At the time, the group—12 civilian and military analysts from the United States and Europe—was described as “influential” and “notably bipartisan.”¹²⁴ Yet the group’s legitimacy as an independent body was suspect for reasons that hinted at the larger problem of how military organizations had domesticated internal dissent in an effort to preserve independence from authority and promote predictable rather than potentially innovative outcomes. By mirroring the consultations with academic experts that Petraeus undertook on behalf of COIN doctrine and the surge, the mere act of bringing in civilian advisers suggested a cynical attempt to take a page from “2007 playbook for Iraq.”¹²⁵ In the charged political environment of the 2009 strategy review, an expert imprimatur on McChrystal’s assessment could be viewed as a bid to “deftly enlist the Washington class of think tankers, armchair warriors, foreign-policy pundits and op-ed writers in the success” of the military mission—which implied the Obama administration’s endorsement of Pentagon recommendations.¹²⁶

Suspensions along these lines were not alleviated when civilians who participated in McChrystal’s assessment proceeded to prod White House officials. Asked shortly after his return from Kabul whether administration statements expressing concern about deploying additional troops were helping the strategy, Anthony H. Cordesman from the Center for Strategic and International Studies said “it would probably be just as well if people in the National Security Council and the White House made their judgments after they get the assessment they need rather than try to resource constrain an

¹²⁴ Rozen (2009).

¹²⁵ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 148.

¹²⁶ Rozen (2009).

assessment in a way that can lose the war.”¹²⁷ Kagan, another adviser to McChrystal, signed a September 2009 open letter from conservatives urging Obama “to continue on the path you have taken thus far and give our commanders on the ground the forces they need to implement a successful counterinsurgency strategy.”¹²⁸

Nor did the actual composition of McChrystal’s strategic advisory group—whether accidental or intentional—suggest that its major recommendations would depart from the Iraq script.¹²⁹ “We did not develop any ‘party line,’ and we were actively encouraged to challenge every aspect of current thinking and conventional wisdom—something every member of the group vigorously did,” Cordesman insisted. “As we worked together, we agreed on many points, although almost always with nuanced differences. We disagreed on many others.”¹³⁰ On closer examination, however, a case could be made that between Iraq and Afghanistan the military’s pool of national security experts worthy of consultation had been winnowed to those with favorable views on the expanded role of ground forces envisioned in COIN doctrine.

Among the members of the group, Biddle and Kagan had backed the operational necessity of large ground forces in general and the advisability of the Iraq surge in particular—although Biddle’s support for both positions was more qualified than Kagan’s. CNAS’s Andrew Exum and RAND’s Terrence Kelly were former Army officers who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹³¹ Jerermy Shapiro from the Brookings Institution, Etienne de Durand from France’s

¹²⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies (2009).

¹²⁸ Barbour, et al. (2009).

¹²⁹ For the composition of the group, see Ackerman, “So Who Were the Advisers for McChrystal’s 60-Day Afghanistan Review?” (2009).

¹³⁰ Cordesman, “The Afghanistan Campaign: Can We Win?” (2009).

¹³¹ Center for a New American Security (2011). RAND Corporation (2011).

Institut français des relations internationales, and Luis Peral from the European Union Institute for Security Studies were primarily experts on the US and European experience with insurgency and peace building.¹³² Cordesman's views that the United States was "going to have to provide the resources if we want to win"—including "very substantial budget increases ... more brigade combat troops and ... financing both the civilian effort needed in the field and a near doubling of Afghan national security forces"—placed him within the COIN mainstream.¹³³ Of the remaining four advisers, one was Kagan's wife Kimberly—the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War—and the other three were employees of the Department of Defense.¹³⁴

To a large degree, the homogeneity of McChrystal's outside experts was a reflection of their wealthiest patron, a defense department with revised but mostly uniform attitudes and priorities on the future of war. In April 2008, Gates had encouraged future Army officers at West Point to "take on the mantle of fearless, thoughtful but loyal dissent" that had changed the US approach in Iraq. But speaking to Air Force officers at Air University the same day, the defense secretary drew the line at challenging the status quo in relation to allocating military resources in a manner consistent with the Petraeus paradigm. "In my view we can do and we should do more to meet the needs of men and women fighting in the current conflicts while their outcome may still be in doubt," Gates said. "Because people were stuck in old ways of doing

¹³² See research listed at Brookings Institution (2011); *Institut français des relations internationales* (2011); and European Union Institute for Security Studies (2009).

¹³³ Rozen (2009).

¹³⁴ For the composition of the group, see Ackerman, "So Who Were the Advisers for McChrystal's 60-Day Afghanistan Review?" (2009). Group member Catherine Dale was associated with the Congressional Research Service, but had accepted a position as an adviser to the commander of the ISAF Joint Command.

business,” the secretary’s efforts to get the Air Force to resource COIN had “been like pulling teeth.”¹³⁵

Gates made it clear to military leaders that he was not interested in being their dentist when it came to conformity on the Iraq surge or its larger implications for global security or America’s defense posture. In March 2008, he had forced the resignation of US Central Command’s Admiral William “Fox” Fallon for opposing the idea of regime change in Iran and for suggesting that operations in Iraq prevented a “stronger effort in Afghanistan” and “more focus on Pakistan.”¹³⁶ In June 2008, Gates fired the Air Force secretary, Michael Wynne, and its chief of staff, General T. Michael Moseley, for displaying the kind of operational hard-headedness he had denounced in his speech at Air University.¹³⁷

None of this argues there were better people available to advise McChrystal than those he picked, or that Gates was wrong where subordinates such as Fallon, Wynne, or Moseley were right. From the perspective of critical discourse, what matters is that the specific conditions observers credited with improving the strategy in Iraq—skepticism toward standardized solutions to unique problems, inclusive discussions on reforming military doctrine, individual autonomy in advancing operational solutions outside official channels—had become as distasteful to Pentagon’s new leaders in mid-2008 as when their predecessors fought the Iraq surge just two years earlier.

Whereas Bush had sought the specific kind of solution Petraeus would implement in Iraq, Obama—as seen in the last chapter—sought a wider range

¹³⁵ Associated Press, “Gates calls on USAF for more war help” (2008).

¹³⁶ Barnett (2008).

¹³⁷ Ricks, *The Gamble* (2009), 115-116.

of options in Afghanistan. Instead of providing more possibilities but recommending the best one, Mullen, Petraeus, and McChrystal appeared to remove any option but COIN from the president's consideration, alienating potential civilian and military allies along the way. The Pentagon worked against diluting its recommendations with the suggestion, endorsed by current and former senior officers, that COIN could be applied on a more limited scale if supplemented by expanded air or special operations attacks against insurgents or terrorists—the “hybrid option” originally proposed by Biden.¹³⁸

The world could not afford to see “Afghanistan once again become a sanctuary for transnational extremists the way it was prior to the 9/11 attacks,” Petraeus told Fox News in August 2010. “And the only way to do that that any of us can fathom is by doing what it is that we are attempting to do. And that is to carry out a comprehensive civil military counterinsurgency campaign,” he said.¹³⁹ Although this belief in the strategy was surely sincere, it sidestepped the fact that at least one alternative approach was at work in places like Pakistan and Yemen, which despite their differences shared the Afghan government's weak legitimacy and its contested control of insurgent or terrorist strongholds.

Statements asserting the uncontested authority of COIN were not merely a function of unified official support of the US and NATO strategy. Asked to explain why the military had failed to provide alternatives to a comprehensive COIN campaign, Mullen reportedly told Obama during a private meeting, “I

¹³⁸ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 236-237.

¹³⁹ Fox News, “Petraeus: Reconciliation With Taliban is Ultimate Goal for Afghanistan's Future” (2010).

didn't see any other path.”¹⁴⁰ Other paths existed, regardless of their final merit, but none were developed to the extent that they could be seriously considered, much less thoroughly evaluated. Convinced that the military had asked and answered the question of COIN's validity through its experiences in Iraq, the military leaders who mattered most to US strategy did not see the need for their colleagues, the president, or others to revisit the question in the case of Afghanistan.

Evaluating COIN through Hidden Progress. The problem with the asserted authority of COIN doctrine was that its true believers were not numerous within the military and were less numerous outside it. Proponents who occupied enough positions of power to keep COIN rolling along could insist on its effectiveness in the abstract, but to expand ownership outside the charmed circle the doctrine's results in Afghanistan needed to be real. As the experience in Marjah showed, straight observation of COIN in action was difficult because even ambiguous results materialized slowly. The nature of COIN also introduced equity problems by hiding the doctrine's progress from those who sought to verify it.

Military commanders faced two related equity problems in describing their overall progress to other elites. The first was that the data potentially relevant to the war was immense, because the radically transformative objectives of counterinsurgency remained the gold standard of achievement despite an accelerated political timeline. Any effort to simplify this picture raised a second problem: the various interpretations of COIN doctrine left open

¹⁴⁰ Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (2010), 279.

the question of exactly which transformations mattered, so assessments remained open to the charge that analysts had missed the essential point.

The two most comprehensive public accounts of the war provided by the US military in 2010—the April and November “1230” reports provided to Congress under provisions of the National Defense Authorization Act—illustrate the dilemmas COIN posed for critical evaluation.¹⁴¹ The April report, compiled under McChrystal, consisted of 151 pages of metrics related to the status of 121 districts and the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF). With the exception of United Nations data on narcotics production and civilian casualties, the information was drawn from operational reports and surveys compiled by ISAF units.¹⁴² The scale of the coalition presence, the inaccessibility of major areas of the country to observers without a military escort, and the classification of NATO data systems combined to assure that the report’s findings would be difficult for others to verify, except in small pieces.

In addition, the volume of data in each area of COIN operations—security, governance, and development—acquired significance only when the complexity was simplified through the subjective assessment of local commanders. Districts received a color code corresponding to judgments that—at least to uninitiated outsiders—reflected fine shades of meaning: whether there were *occasional* or *frequent* threats to security; whether local governance was *emerging*, *unproductive*, or *dysfunctional*; or whether economic development

¹⁴¹ US Department of Defense, “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces” (April 2010). US Department of Defense, “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan” (November 2010).

¹⁴² UN data can be found at US Department of Defense, “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces” (April 2010), 43 and 75.

was *dependent, minimal, or stalled*. These evaluations were further abstracted by an overall assessment of whether a given district *supports* or *sympathizes with* the Afghan government or the insurgency.¹⁴³

The November 2010 report, produced by Petraeus, was more concise at just over 100 pages. Instead of attempting to provide a comprehensive picture of Afghan society, it limited reporting mostly to those activities directly involving ISAF forces. The later report retained the threat-based color codes used to gauge district security, and added a similarly subjective rating of Afghan forces as *effective with advisors, effective with assistance, or dependent on coalition forces*.¹⁴⁴ But gone were the district-level evaluations of governance and development, replaced by narratives describing broad trends interspersed with a few supporting facts.

The report's narrower focus introduced its own distortions, however, as Cordesman observed in the most detailed contemporary critique of the assessment. The analysis treated "violence largely in terms of major acts of violence and attacks on ISAF and Afghan officials and the ANSF" rather than mapping the "lower levels of violence and intimidation" of Afghan civilians "that are all the insurgency needs in many areas to be effective."¹⁴⁵ The report omitted "virtually every potentially embarrassing metric dealing with the civil course of the war contained in the April report" in favor of positive but less meaningful input metrics such as the number of people assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams.¹⁴⁶ When the narrative made generalizations, it often

¹⁴³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴⁴ US Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan" (November 2010), 31, 38 and 52.

¹⁴⁵ Cordesman, "The War in Afghanistan" (2010).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

ignored important contributing factors—as when “the discussion of borders largely ignore[d] corruption, and focuse[d] on volume of activity in an economy where increases in imports are largely war and aid driven.”¹⁴⁷ By relegating the evaluation of the ANSF to a separate section completed by the command charged with manning, training, and equipping them—the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan—the November report repeated its predecessor’s failure to define effectiveness “in any meaningful sense in unclassified terms” while “ignoring the ethnic, tribal, corruption, and power broker problems that are often far more critical in shaping ANSF capabilities.”¹⁴⁸

Although any government report can be subject to Cordesman’s brand of critical dissection, reporting COIN’s progress on its many fronts over the course of 2010 was made more troublesome by elite preoccupation with only one trend: worsening violence. The United Nations concluded that 2,777 Afghan civilians were killed during 2010, 15 percent more than in 2009 and the highest count in four years.¹⁴⁹ Although 75 percent of those deaths were attributed to insurgents, ISAF could share blame—especially for failing to prevent the “most alarming trend” in violence, a doubling of political assassinations aimed at the nascent Afghan government.¹⁵⁰ People “are afraid to go and vote, people are afraid of being elected, people are afraid of actually participating in civilian society,” the UN envoy to Afghanistan reported in March 2011.¹⁵¹

With respect to similar trends in violence after he took command in Iraq, Petraeus had “tried to temper expectations while also showing reason for hope,”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (2011), i.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ M. Robinson (2011).

promising less progress than he expected he could achieve.¹⁵² This pattern of discourse persisted in Afghanistan, where the predictability of insurgent violence was offered as a kind of inoculation against its public impact and a possible prelude to the collapse of the insurgency's legitimacy. Even as the surge began to produce "fragile and reversible" gains in early 2011, therefore, Petraeus cautioned that the coming year would be "as violent or perhaps even more violent" than 2010, since insurgents might "come back in force" with "sensational attacks that could be indiscriminate in nature."¹⁵³ Violence by insurgents was the price to be paid until—*mutatis mutandis*—COIN operations and a popular backlash made it stop.

Convincing others that COIN *could* stop violence, though, required military officials to stress that their operations were different from a mere escalation of force. "You can't kill or capture your way out of an industrial-strength insurgency like that which we faced in Iraq," Petraeus told a Harvard audience in April 2009, in a phrase often repeated by COIN's boosters.¹⁵⁴ An "insurgency cannot be defeated by attrition," McChrystal's COIN guidance informed his forces a few months later. Its "supply of fighters, and even leadership, is effectively endless." Conventional "military action against insurgents consumes considerable resources with little real return and is likely to alienate the people we are trying to secure."¹⁵⁵ Violence was thus presented as a kind of unavoidable last resort that enlightened counterinsurgents employed reluctantly, albeit frequently.

¹⁵² L. Robinson (2008), 178.

¹⁵³ Vogt, "Associated Press Interview: Petraeus says tough summer ahead" (2011).

¹⁵⁴ Walsh (2009).

¹⁵⁵ McChrystal, "ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance" (2009), 2-3.

On the other hand, a lingering result of media descriptions of the 2009 strategy review—considered in the last chapter—was the enduring perception that COIN was not the only set of operative tactics in Afghanistan. The US approach was “counterinsurgency with a strong dose of counterterrorism,” in Biden’s view.¹⁵⁶ To achieve Obama’s “overarching goal ... to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” what McChrystal had considered an effectively endless supply of insurgent-terrorist leaders and fighters needed to be targeted.¹⁵⁷ As it turned out, this was not an impossible task. By May 2010, leading officials in the White House and the NSC had concluded, according to Bob Woodward, that the “counterterrorism portion” of the strategy—carried out by the US military and Afghan paramilitary forces working with the Central Intelligence Agency—“was the one that was really producing.”¹⁵⁸

Yet how could senior officials portray these secret successes to people outside the upper echelons of the US government? Asked in March 2010 to describe the contributions of special operations forces (SOF) in Afghanistan, McChrystal offered this bromide to a group of influential American media commentators:

What [role] our SOF across the board plays is an extraordinarily important complement to other activities. Nothing, I’ve learned, nothing works well stand-alone. So meshing that together, I would say that’s the first thing, and, you know I’m not going to say much, but I would say that you’d be extraordinarily proud of the men and women, both from the US and also our coalition partners, in what they do every day. I mean many of these people have been involved since 2001 and some before, just at it almost

¹⁵⁶ Wolffe (2010), 281.

¹⁵⁷ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (December 2009).

¹⁵⁸ Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (2010), 355.

constantly. So they are a major factor and should be a source of great pride.¹⁵⁹

Facts about the effective use of force were not much better than bland assurances, since it was difficult to place statistics in any meaningful and verifiable context with respect to the relative strength of insurgent or terrorist networks. During the same month that McChrystal expressed his heartfelt but unsupported pride in SOF, for example, ISAF reported killing senior Taliban commanders in Helmand and Kapisa provinces twice, in addition to capturing another three senior commanders in Helmand.¹⁶⁰ It became a running joke among the press corps in Kabul that the most dangerous job in Afghanistan was also the easiest one to fill: the number two Taliban commanders that ISAF managed to shoot or detain every other week.¹⁶¹

Confronted with the immediate spectacle of insurgent brutality and COIN progress that was like watching grass grow, military officials were under pressure to find productive ways to talk about trends in violence. Three leading researchers posed the dilemma facing McChrystal and Petraeus in this way:

perhaps the biggest contribution that metrics can make to a counterinsurgency campaign is to establish a foundation for strategic patience—though not blind faith. Counterinsurgency campaigns, especially successful ones, last on average over a decade. For this reason, political leaders rightly counsel patience. But skeptical publics rightly demand interim measures that can demonstrate that progress is being made. Both points of view are legitimate, even if they are in tension.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ McChrystal, author's transcript of roundtable discussion with columnist accompanying the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (March 2010).

¹⁶⁰ From ISAF press releases for March 2010, archived at <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/index.php>. Accessed 15 March 2011.

¹⁶¹ From the author's conversations with reporters while assigned in Kabul.

¹⁶² Campbell, O'Hanlon, and Shapiro (2009).

The tension between patience and progress produced contradictions between COIN as a still invisible, tectonic shift in legitimacy and COIN as visible daily action that—among its more obvious effects—answered violence with violence.

The man who insisted that the United States could not kill its way to success therefore was compelled eventually to describe his gains in precisely those terms. The day before the release of the UN report on Afghan civilian casualties in 2010, Petraeus told the *New York Times* the “Taliban have never been under the pressure that they were put under over the course of the last 8 to 10 months,” when 1,600 missions over 90 days had killed or captured nearly 3,000 insurgents.¹⁶³ Such “summary, favorable statistics,” as Cordesman once again pointed out, could not substitute for more detailed “official unclassified metrics and analyses.”¹⁶⁴ Given “the long history of reports of successful attacks on insurgent groups that found new leaders, adapted, and rode out such attacks,” elites needed “something more than the occasional body count” to improve their confidence that operations were having a positive effect.¹⁶⁵

The obscured effects of violence on the insurgency were matched by limited information on the prospects of political reconciliation. Both McChrystal and Petraeus extended the hope of a negotiated resolution. “As a soldier, my personal feeling is that there’s been enough fighting,” McChrystal told the *Financial Times* in January 2010, adding that “I believe that a political solution to all conflicts is the inevitable outcome. And it’s the right outcome.”¹⁶⁶ The prospect of Taliban fighters laying down their weapons was “very real,”

¹⁶³ Gall, “Petraeus Sees Military Progress in Afghanistan” (2011).

¹⁶⁴ Cordesman, “Afghanistan and the Uncertain Metrics of Progress: Part Six: Showing Victory is Possible,” (2011), slide 7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Green (2010).

Petraeus told Fox News in August.¹⁶⁷ Reconciliation, he emphasized the following month, was “the way you end insurgencies.”¹⁶⁸ Although military commanders were “in the information loop and in a couple of cases ... helped in a sense,” it was proper for reconciliation to be “pursued by the Afghan leadership at the very highest levels.”¹⁶⁹ The job of the military was “to do the fighting necessary to shape conditions where people can get on with their lives.”¹⁷⁰

Afghan statesmen and US diplomats who were thus tagged with responsibility for advancing the dialogue did not provide much more information about the political track. After Petraeus suggested that talks were proceeding, Karzai’s spokesman Wahid Omar said progress was limited to “signals from different levels of Afghan Taliban wanting to reconnect with the government. We haven’t had anything formal yet.”¹⁷¹ To the consternation of Western reporters in Kabul, Eikenberry rarely provided on-the-record comments about substantive issues.¹⁷² Even if he had insight into Karzai’s political discussions with insurgents, it seemed clear he would not discuss them. “I will never publicly talk about my relationship with the Head of State of a country,” Eikenberry told Afghan reporters shortly after McChrystal’s resignation. “I continue, as United States Ambassador, to meet with your President and all the leaders within your Government as we go about our

¹⁶⁷ Fox News, “Petraeus: Reconciliation With Taliban is Ultimate Goal for Afghanistan’s Future” (2010).

¹⁶⁸ Vogt, “Petraeus: Taliban have reached out to reconcile” (2010).

¹⁶⁹ Fox News, “Petraeus: Reconciliation With Taliban is Ultimate Goal for Afghanistan’s Future” (2010). Vogt, “Petraeus: Taliban have reached out to reconcile” (2010).

¹⁷⁰ Green (2010).

¹⁷¹ Vogt, “Petraeus: Taliban have reached out to reconcile” (2010).

¹⁷² From the author’s conversations with reporters in Kabul. Eikenberry’s relative reticence with Western media also can be judged by examining his archived prepared remarks and transcripts at http://kabul.usembassy.gov/official_transcripts.html.

business of conducting our foreign relations with your country. But, really, it's a breach of protocol and convention to ever comment on those kind of relations and the nature of them. That's privileged conversation."¹⁷³

As Eikenberry's defense of diplomatic privilege and Cordesman's demand for more unclassified information about attacks on insurgents make clear, progress in Afghanistan—where it existed—often was hidden behind a wall of secrecy. Officials who publicly swore by the value of transparency and accountability frequently reverted to institutional habits of information control. Sometimes secrecy was justified, as when the lives of Afghans assisting coalition forces were at stake. More typically, secrecy was reflexive: information would not be discussed simply because officials considered its classification a definitive argument for its concealment, rather than a possibly arbitrary administrative designation. But sometimes secrecy related to how members of institutions viewed themselves and how they expected to be viewed by others. This third reason for information control—the role of discourse in defining elites as a class—is the focus of the next chapter.

With respect to the military doctrine informing elite conceptions of the strategy, though, there was a fourth reason to limit information about killing insurgents or compromising with them. Violence and diplomacy introduced contradictions into the dominant COIN narrative. Targeting insurgents and working toward a political settlement may have had real value when combined with COIN's comprehensive efforts to build a functioning Afghan state. In terms of public discourse, however, these various approaches were less compatible. Breakthroughs in violence or diplomacy raised hopes for rapid progress and

¹⁷³ *Wall Street Journal*, "McChrystal Aftermath: Eikenberry Meets Kabul Press," *Washington Wire* blog (2010).

reintroduced questions about the appropriateness and consequences of COIN as a more expensive, expansive solution.

Targeted killings and detentions corresponded to Biden's preference for the counterterrorism (CT) strand of the strategy, which in turn was a plausible extension of Obama's stated aims against al Qaeda. It was more dubious to assume the value of those same operations against al Qaeda's extremist allies in the Afghan Taliban, Haqqani network, and other insurgent elements with roots in Afghanistan while also stressing the necessity of COIN. As the international relations scholar Michael J. Boyle has pointed out, COIN and CT are "governed by different assumptions about the role of force, the importance of winning support among the local population, and the necessity of building a strong and representative government."¹⁷⁴

COIN implies a discriminate use of force against insurgents with deep roots in local communities, with the ultimate aim of building up a government capable of controlling territory. In contrast, CT deals almost exclusively with effective rather than morally pristine operations against terrorists in areas where they may lack strong community ties. There is no expectation that CT will contribute to the government's ability to provide security; instead, it serves as a substitute for such security.¹⁷⁵

Given these conceptual distinctions, it is easy to see how emphasizing activities that looked like CT could raise uncomfortable questions about the validity of COIN. If the reportedly small number of al Qaeda terrorists who were the focus of the strategy could be removed without a public backlash or without the need to invest billions in propping up a corrupt government against the

¹⁷⁴ Boyle (2010), 343.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 342-345.

Taliban, was COIN necessary? If the raids were directed instead against indigenous insurgents, did they not risk becoming counterproductive?

The tantalizing prospect of a quick political fix also contradicted the COIN narrative's emphasis on the Afghan government's need to build its legitimacy on a more or less gradual and liberal basis. If Afghans were willing to make severe concessions to the Taliban, then what was the purpose of the war? If a more favorable compromise was achievable now, why was the United States not pressing the Afghan government to pursue it? The military attempted to have it both ways, suggesting that battlefield gains could win a better and broader settlement just beyond the visible horizon. Petraeus assured American audiences that there were liberal but mutually acceptable "redlines" for any deal with the Taliban, including laying down weapons, cutting ties to al Qaeda, and recognizing the rights protected by the Afghan constitution.¹⁷⁶ Walking back the general's cautious optimism even further a week later, Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell told reporters, "We need to take the fight more aggressively and for a greater duration to the Taliban and other extremists in Afghanistan for them to feel the kind of pressure necessary ... to spark a movement of reintegration and reconciliation."¹⁷⁷

In its public promotion of a comprehensive agenda and its tentative engagement with less transparent issues of violence and diplomacy, COIN discourse frustrated the legitimacy of a strategy intended to promote regional security through a variety of means. With the strategy review simplified to a debate on troop numbers and timelines, with COIN's draw on personnel and

¹⁷⁶ Fox News, "Petraeus: Reconciliation With Taliban is Ultimate Goal for Afghanistan's Future" (2010).

¹⁷⁷ Alexander and Stewart (2010).

resources, and with barriers to media coverage of special operations and traditional diplomacy, what had started as an Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy in March 2009 was by 2010 increasingly considered and discussed as an Afghanistan strategy. The difficulty of balancing perceptions and expectations of US strategic focus was the unfortunate side effect of a transnational problem. But as a concept of operations COIN tended to upset rather than restore the necessary balance in discourse.

Some observers who saw Pakistan as the key to regional stability questioned the prospects for a COIN campaign in Afghanistan. The “elimination or even the reduction” of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan “would ease American burdens in Afghanistan by no small margin,” the *New Yorker*’s Steve Coll argued in March 2010:

Unfortunately, the geopolitical incentives that have informed Pakistan’s alliance with the Afghan Taliban remain unaltered. Pakistan’s generals have retained a bedrock belief that, however unruly and distasteful Islamist militias such as the Taliban may be, they could yet be useful proxies to ward off a perceived existential threat from India. In the Army’s view, at least, that threat has not receded.¹⁷⁸

Similarly, those who were concerned with Afghanistan’s value as a terrorist sanctuary were still free to wonder about the effectiveness of COIN in comparison to possible alternatives. Obama’s strategy mistakenly equated “the return of the Taliban ... with the return of al Qaeda,” and as a result the United States was now “a full protagonist in Afghanistan’s civil war,” Richard Haass argued in a July 2010 issue of *Newsweek*. “Such situations call for more modest and focused policies of counterterrorism along the lines of those being

¹⁷⁸ Coll (2010).

applied in Yemen and Somalia, rather than a full-fledged counterinsurgency effort.”¹⁷⁹

As the struggle to apply COIN doctrine as discourse demonstrates, the real and apparent crises of security, governance, and development in Afghanistan required more than a promise of delayed gratification on an investment of many billions of dollars and many thousands of lives. COIN’s authority in the Afghan context was an issue contested by emotion and reason, not one that had been settled by strategic revelations in Iraq. Elite willingness to suspend judgment on the doctrine’s validity required concessions on equity—a more inclusive, transparent, and autonomous discussion of progress, including those privileged or classified actions that were compensating for COIN’s shortcomings. In the absence of greater equity, elite trust in the validity of the dominant operational approach was problematic at best. Faith in American forces and their Afghan allies was the last, best hope for a consensus that an uncertain faith in COIN failed to deliver.

¹⁷⁹ Haass, “We’re Not Winning. It’s Not Worth It” (2010).

CHAPTER 5

VICTIMS AND VILLAINS:

CONFLICTING IDENTITIES IN AFGHANISTAN'S WAR STORIES

For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"

But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot...

— Rudyard Kipling
"Tommy," Barracks-Room Ballads, 1892¹

The difficult language and peculiar characters of the tribesmen are the study of a lifetime. A knowledge of the local conditions, of the power and influence of the khans, or other rulers of the people; of the general history and traditions of the country, is a task which must be entirely specialised. Rough and ready methods are excellent while the tribes resist, but something more is required when they are anxious to submit. Men are needed who understand the whole question, and all the details of the quarrel, between the natives and the Government, and who can in some measure appreciate both points of view. I do not believe that such are to be found in the army.

— Winston S. Churchill
The Story of the Malakand Field Force, 1898²

Starting in the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, the first day of the lunar new year, North Vietnamese soldiers and National Liberation Front guerillas launched a series of attacks against government and allied forces in South Vietnam. Historians of the war often portrayed the Tet Offensive as a

¹ Kipling (1892 and 1896)

² Churchill (1898), 146.

psychological turning point within the United States. In reality, there was no definitive reversal in domestic support for the war in 1968. Elite consensus had fractured visibly as early as August 1967. That month, Pentagon in-fighting between the Joint Chiefs, who favored escalated bombing of the North, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Office of Systems Analysis, which favored pacification of the population and strengthening South Vietnam's defense forces, erupted in a clash of official testimony before the Senate, followed by McNamara's resignation.³ Polling data in November 1967 and January 1968 suggested that the public was growing slightly more hawkish—fueled by the desire for America to fight its way out of an unwise war that had become a source of mounting casualties and rising taxes. Subsequent polls would show no immediate, precipitous drop in the public's support for getting tough in Vietnam, rather than getting out.⁴

Yet when CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite declared the war a “bloody stalemate” on 27 February 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson reportedly turned to aides and said, “It's over.”⁵ The sentiment was not a reflection of Cronkite's ability to sway American opinion of the conflict with a single broadcast, as the poll numbers would demonstrate. Instead, Johnson's dismay reflected his political judgment that the mainstream press was now ready to discuss the war less as a heroic national endeavor than as a tragedy for the Vietnamese people and a point of contention within US policy circles.⁶ Whatever the reality on the ground, Vietnam had become a different kind of war for news media.

³ Hallin (1986), 160.

⁴ Hammond (1996), 9.

⁵ Quoted in Hallin (1986), 108.

⁶ Ibid., 175-178.

American journalists did not approach the Tet Offensive wanting their country to fail, however. As Phillip Knightley argues with respect to war coverage in the years before the offensive:

Most correspondents, despite what Washington thought about them, were just as interested in seeing the United States win the war as was the Pentagon. What the correspondents questioned was not American policy, but the tactics used to implement that policy, in particular the backing of Diem as the “white hope” of Vietnam.⁷

Journalists in Vietnam did not share an unpatriotic ideology, but they did share an accepted interpretation of the tactical situation and America’s authoritarian ally. In the opinion of the veteran Asia correspondent Robert Elegant, such views were part of a cycle of self-perpetuating elite opinion:

In my own personal experience most correspondents wanted to talk chiefly to other correspondents to confirm their own mythical vision of the war. Even newcomers were precommitted, as the American jargon has it, to the collective position most of their colleagues had already taken...

Most correspondents were isolated from the Vietnamese by ignorance of their language and culture, as well as by a measure of race estrangement. Most were isolated from the quixotic American Army establishment, itself often as confused as they themselves were, by their moralistic attitudes and their political prejudices. It was inevitable, in the circumstances, that they came to write, in the first instance, for each other...

After each other, correspondents wrote to win the approbation of their editors, who controlled their professional lives and who were closely linked with the intellectual community at home. The consensus of that third circle, the domestic intelligentsia, derived largely from correspondents’ reports and in turn served to determine the nature of those reports. If dispatches did not accord with that consensus, approbation was withheld. Only in the last instance did correspondents address themselves to the general public, the mass of lay readers and viewers.⁸

⁷ Knightley (2000), 421.

⁸ Elegant (1981).

In *Big Story*, his seminal study of news reporting on Tet, Peter Braestrup explains that coverage was “shaped by habit and convention.”⁹ Journalistic “themes” and “story lines” involving action and human interest—which had been used “to routinize major developments and to make events intelligible”—“left newsmen ill-equipped to cope with the unusual ambiguities and uncertainties surrounding Tet.”¹⁰ Specifically, media were “conditioned by standard perceptions of ‘news’” to seek out “the most dramatic elements out of the daily communiqués and briefings in Saigon” and to deploy “reporters to the most dramatic action elsewhere.”¹¹ More than merely describing this drama, media felt an obligation “to ‘explain’ or ‘interpret’ what had happened and, implicitly or explicitly, to forecast the future.”¹² The result of these patterns of reporting was “to leave the shock and confusion of early February [1968], *as then perceived*, ‘fixed’ as the final impression of Tet, and thus as a framework for news judgment and public debate at home.”¹³

More than 40 years after Tet, elite and public perceptions of military operations in foreign lands were still fixed by the habits and conventions of storytelling. At the strategic level, political reporters and commentators framed President Barack Obama’s strategy review as a clash between powerful civilian and military opponents, or as the predictable product of a militarized national security culture. The actual debate among policy makers may have been less antagonistic and militaristic than critics feared, but no one could tell. The administration’s narrative of careful deliberation and unanimous support of the

⁹ Braestrup (1983), 511.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 514.

¹² Ibid., 515.

¹³ Ibid., 517 (emphasis in original).

president's decision was punctured by leaks that were exploited to pressure the process from the outside. The White House and Pentagon responded to this pressure by asserting prerogatives for secrecy and resorting to pragmatic but negative and vague public descriptions of the strategy's objectives and boundaries—such as avoiding “goals that are beyond what can be achieved at a reasonable cost, and what we need to achieve to secure our interests.”¹⁴ Although this may have been a politically expedient way to handle a difficult decision, it did nothing to boost elite confidence that the months-long review had resolved contentious issues. It also left reporters with little choice but to continue to rely on formulaic story lines and unofficial sources to explain the strategy review and its outcome.

Beneath the Washington policy debate, closer observers of events in Afghanistan structured their discourse about ends and means of US strategy around the dominant operational approach: military counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. Many elites assumed that COIN doctrine was authoritative because it was the product of dissent against the failed strategy in Iraq and had created space for a military withdrawal there. Yet the comprehensiveness of COIN doctrine left considerable room for disagreements over not just its tactical application but its basic goals. Elites were free to assume that COIN implied the creation of liberal institutions *or* expedient arrangements that were good enough for Afghanistan, thereby faulting current operations for being either insufficiently principled or practical. Wide-ranging interpretations of objectives meant that measurements of progress were complex and contested. In addition, short-term progress in disrupting insurgent operations or brokering

¹⁴ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (December 2009).

political deals was obscured by organizational preferences for secrecy. The doctrine itself also downplayed the use of force and hopes for quick resolution, so the validity of COIN operations in both practice and theory was anticipated rather than demonstrated throughout 2010.

At the tactical level, many of the narrative frames that had influenced perceptions of US efforts in Vietnam after the Tet Offensive remained in force, coloring not just how media portrayed events in Afghanistan but how elites understood and explained their role in those events. As the chief agents of the strategy in Afghanistan, US troops had to contend with narrative traditions that alternately portrayed them as good people betrayed by a bad cause or bad people betraying a good cause. Similarly, public discourse considered America's Afghan allies as either victims or villains, usually through the standard lenses of war reporting or investigative journalism. The Afghan people were seen as being denied the benefits of liberal society by violence and corruption, or as being possessed by greed and ignorance that thwarted Western efforts to build a lasting peace. If discourse at the strategic and operational levels helped ensure that US strategy in Afghanistan was misunderstood, discourse at the tactical level frequently guaranteed the effects of that strategy—as well as the motives of its chief agents—were misrepresented.

Dominance of the Soldier's Perspective

Afghanistan was a topic that interested a significant number of American elites in 2009 and 2010, but it is important to emphasize that their attention

was divided. Pew Research Center surveys in those years found that Afghanistan was the subject of only four to five percent of all domestic media coverage—ranking behind the US economy in both years, health care in 2009, and national elections and the British Petroleum oil spill in 2010. Coverage of Afghanistan had spiked in the second half of 2009, with the Obama administration’s strategy review accounting for 46 percent of all US media space devoted to the war that year. Once the president made his decision, however, debate over the strategy dropped to 25 percent of Afghanistan-related coverage in 2010, which largely accounted for the 20 percent overall decline in news and opinions about the war. Thus the Pew researchers concluded that the war was not a “big newsmaker without a major Washington component to the story.”¹⁵

Yet whenever presidential attention was *not* turning other elites towards questions of policy and strategy in Afghanistan, most media discourse about the war centered on combat, violence, and casualties. After stories about the internal politics of the strategy from journalists in Washington, the largest percentage of US news from Afghanistan—14 percent of all war-related coverage in 2009 and 20 percent in 2010—were stories about violence done by or to American troops. In contrast, only eight to nine percent of stories about the conflict covered the internal affairs of the Afghan government, and only 3 to 4 percent focused on the status of Taliban and al Qaeda forces.¹⁶ The work of writing about combat was also professionally rewarding. Articles written by

¹⁵ Jurkowitz, Rosenstiel, and Mitchell (2011). Afghanistan accounted for 5 percent of all US news coverage in 2009 and 4 percent in 2010. The corresponding percentages for other topics were: economy – 20 percent in 2009 and 14 percent in 2010; health care – nine percent in 2009 and five percent in 2010; national elections – 10 percent in 2010; and BP oil spill – seven percent in 2010.

¹⁶ Ibid.

C.J. Chivers and Dexter Filkins during embeds with military units helped the *New York Times* win the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting.¹⁷

Washington Post correspondent Greg Jaffe won the 2010 Gerald R. Ford Prize for Distinguished Reporting on National Defense for his reconstruction of the battle of Wanat—an intense fight in remote Nuristan Province that killed 9 US soldiers and wounded another 27 in July 2008—and its aftermath.¹⁸

Discussing embedded reporters' coverage of military operations in remote eastern Afghanistan, author and Marine veteran Bing West observes:

... the writing in *The New York Times* and other national papers was so vivid that the Korengal [Valley] became a symbol of the war. By describing real, concrete frustrations and struggles, journalists like [Alissa] Rubin and Chivers illustrated universal truths about the nature of tribes, cultures, and battles. The generals were oblivious that the Korengal illustrated the war's strategic drift. If the generals couldn't solve a front-page problem, what issues were they solving?¹⁹

This begs the question of whether military strategy should be solving front-page problems—especially in the case of the Korengal. Despite the attention paid to the valley by the *New York Times*, West, and many others, at least one Army company commander in charge of forces there came to believe his fight was a distraction, driven by local resistance to outsiders rather than support for a broader rebellion against the Kabul government. He reportedly advised McChrystal in early 2010 that leaving the valley was “the right thing to do.”²⁰

The media value of the Korengal thus was much clearer than its overall

¹⁷ Columbia University (2009). Articles by Chivers and Filkins can be accessed at the New York Times web site (<http://www.nytimes.com>) or the Pulitzer archives (<http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/8326>, and <http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/8322>).

¹⁸ Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation (2010). Links to Jaffe's three articles on Wanat can be accessed at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/world/battle-of-wanat>.

¹⁹ West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 46.

²⁰ Jaffe, “U.S. retreat from Afghan valley marks recognition of blunder” (2010).

strategic value. The fact that generals chose to deploy and eventually withdraw a small number of troops from some of the many insurgent ratlines to Pakistan said something about the Afghanistan strategy, but not too much. The front-page importance of the “Valley of Death” and other places like it derived mainly from news media’s desire to march toward the sound of guns.

Chasing violence undeniably told important stories about the war, but it also reflected an established pattern of war reporting that implied location-specific brutality could reflect more general truths. According to Sebastian Junger, another popular author embedded at combat outposts in the Korengal and Pech valleys in Kunar Province, such inductive reasoning did not always apply in Afghanistan:

Most journalists wanted to cover combat—as opposed to humanitarian operations—so they got embedded with combat units and wound up painting a picture of a country engulfed in war. In fact, most areas of the country were relatively stable; you had to get pretty lucky to find yourself in anything even vaguely resembling a firefight.²¹

In Junger’s view, the idea that first-hand experience of combat was *more authentic* than the cumulative balance between violent and nonviolent events was a distorting legacy of the Vietnam War, where the military and media bitterly divided over the gulf between sunny reports from Saigon and the sometimes grim struggles of soldiers in the field. “Vietnam was *our* paradigm as well, *our* template for how not to get hoodwinked by the U.S. military,” Junger argues, “and it exerted such a powerful influence that anything short of implacable cynicism felt like a sellout.”²²

²¹ Junger (2010), 133.

²² Ibid.

Given the attractions of battlefield violence, however, it is no surprise that elites stepped up to feed the demand for military perspectives. In addition to daily coverage by embedded reporters, two of the best-selling and best-reviewed books about the war in 2009 and 2010 were written from the soldier's point of view: Army Captain Craig Mullaney's *The Unforgiving Minute*, and Junger's *War*.²³ These were followed in early 2011 by West's account of the trials and tribulations of American combat troops in Afghanistan, *The Wrong War*.²⁴ Junger and the photojournalist Tim Hetherington assembled video collected in the Korengal for the war film *Restrepo*, which won the grand jury prize for documentaries at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival.²⁵ Nathaniel Fick and Andrew Exum, who had made their names with books about their experiences as military officers in Afghanistan, turned out influential policy papers, articles, and blog posts from the Center for a New American Security.²⁶ By the end of 2010, more than 130 current or former military personnel maintained blogs devoted to Afghanistan, with another 2,200 US military bloggers writing on a wider range of defense topics that often touched on developments there.²⁷ It is therefore fair to say that whenever Washington elites were not talking about their own policy perspectives on Afghanistan, the views they sought or heard were most often those of current and former US ground troops, often filtered through news media.

²³ Mullaney (2009). Junger (2010).

²⁴ West, *The Wrong War* (2011).

²⁵ Outpost Films (2010).

²⁶ Exum, *This Man's Army: A Soldier's Story from the Front Lines of the War on Terrorism* (2004). Fick, *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer* (2005). For work from CNAS, see Exum, et al., "Triage: The Next Twelve Months in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (2009); Exum, "Leverage: Designing a Political Campaign for Afghanistan," 2010; and Exum's blog at <http://www.cnas.org/blogs/abumuqawama>.

²⁷ From a 12 December 2010 search of military blogs indexed at <http://www.milblogging.com>.

To some extent, Washington had engineered this outcome. Following the shock of the 9/11 attacks, the Pentagon's initial communication strategy for Operation Enduring Freedom, in the words of German foreign policy analyst Thomas Rid, was to "provide media coverage from Arlington."²⁸ The desire for tight information controls in October 2001 was understandable, as was the relative ease with which they were implemented. Terrorists had executed a devastating attack on American soil less than a month prior to the operation. The battlefield was the remote and rugged terrain of Afghanistan, and the force consisted mainly of US aircraft, special operations forces, and indigenous units of the Northern Alliance—all of which made media access to the fight more problematic. Furthermore, many members of the American and international press corps had been shocked by the September 11 attacks and were willing to give US leaders the benefit of the doubt on matters of policy and access. Even CBS News anchor Dan Rather—soon to become a whipping boy for media bias against the Bush administration—remarked at the time, "George Bush is the President, he makes the decisions, and, you know, as just one American, he wants me to line up, just tell me where."²⁹

Nonetheless, Department of Defense (DOD) officials eventually drew sharp criticism for their handling of the press during the initial months of Enduring Freedom. The journalists aboard the *USS Carl Vinson* were prohibited from filing stories until 20 hours after the initial air strikes, and reporters afloat continued to face delays and reticence from aircrews.³⁰ Permission to fly media representatives aboard US bombers, which had been permitted during

²⁸ Rid (2007), 102.

²⁹ Quoted in Entman (2004), 1.

³⁰ Rid (2007), 102. Becker (2001).

Operation Allied Force air operations over Serbia, was now denied.³¹ As the *New York Times* noted after more than a month of military activity in Afghanistan:

... after-action access to the troops engaged in bombing or other combat missions has been almost nonexistent. While there are hundreds of reporters in countries like Pakistan, the Persian Gulf states, Uzbekistan and the northern areas of Afghanistan—all places where United States troops have been deployed—the Central Command has yet to allow reporters to have any contact with the troops most involved.³²

DOD's attempts to bridge the information gap with footage of special operations shot by combat cameramen were met with skepticism by the Washington press corps. Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria "Torie" Clarke issued a formal apology for "severe shortcomings in our preparedness to support news organizations" when reporters at Forward Operating Base Rhino were barred from covering the return of soldiers killed in a B-52 fratricide incident in December.³³

The backlash against information control by an otherwise forgiving press corps favored two changes in US government communication. The first was the establishment of American and British Coalition Information Centers in Islamabad, London, and Washington—which allowed the chief military partners in Afghanistan to respond on Asian, European, and American timelines, so that news breaking in one region did not pass without official comment into later reports in other regions. A second, more meaningful change was to reinstate the practice of embedding a small number of reporters with Marine and Army combat units. Rid concludes this tactic generally resulted in more informed

³¹ Paul and Kim (2004), 50

³² Becker (2001).

³³ Clarke, *Lipstick on a Pig: Winning in the No-Spin Era by Someone Who Knows the Game* (2006), 22-23.

coverage of military actions from December 2001 through May 2002, when more than 1,000 US newspaper stories were filed with Afghanistan datelines.³⁴

Coverage of Afghanistan all but disappeared in 2003, however, when Clarke and her public affairs team at the Pentagon arranged for more than 700 reporters to embed with units involved in the invasion of Iraq.³⁵ In justifying her increasingly radical departure from the government's post-Vietnam approach of restricting media access to battlefield units, Clarke cited three benefits from media embeds. First, reporters could refute anticipated Iraqi propaganda.³⁶ Second, media vigilance could serve as a check on soldiers' behavior, providing in Clarke's words "a pretty powerful incentive to do the right thing."³⁷

More than anything, though, large numbers of embedded journalists could provide a continuous source of fresh news content from friendly forces, allowing soldiers' perspectives on a controversial military operation to dominate 24-hour news cycles. As Clarke told senior DOD and US Central Command leaders during a December 2002 meeting in Qatar, the "essence of the communication plan is to flood the zone with information ... information dominance."³⁸ The tactic worked. One recent, comprehensive study found that 71.6 percent of US newspaper articles published from the beginning of the operation on 19 March 2003 until Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech on 1 May featured soldiers as a primary source. Stories about combat and military

³⁴ Rid (2007), 103-107. L. Robertson (2003).

³⁵ Paul and Kim (2004), 54. L. Robertson (2003) notes that a Lexis-Nexus search for US newspaper articles with Afghanistan datelines produced only 167 articles written between January and April 2003.

³⁶ For US government concerns about Iraqi propaganda before the invasion, see White House Office of Global Communications (2003) and Yurechko (2002).

³⁷ Clarke, *Lipstick on a Pig* (2006), 76.

³⁸ Ibid., 55.

movements accounted for 46 percent of all stories, while 24 percent focused on soldiers' lives and 16 percent on their deaths. "The majority of war coverage in the study heavily emphasized the soldier's experiences of the war while downplaying the effects of the invasion on the Iraqi people," said the study's author, Andrew M. Lindner.³⁹

Yet the benefits of embedding ran both ways. In general, reporters got what they wanted from close contact with soldiers. "We were offered an irresistible opportunity: free transportation to the front line of the war, dramatic pictures, dramatic sounds, great quotes," National Public Radio's Tom Gjelten observed. "Who can pass that up?"⁴⁰ A 2007 survey by the Project for Excellence in Journalism discovered that 60 percent of veteran correspondents tended to view embedding as a means of giving them the access they needed to cover the Iraq war, while only five percent felt that the program was a way for the military to control media coverage.⁴¹ Content analyses of press coverage in the first five years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan supported the argument that control of the US media narrative was largely self-imposed by reporters and editors. Embedded media produced more episodic, combat-related reporting, but such coverage faithfully reflected American cultural assumptions and the current state of domestic elite consensus on the war.⁴²

The rising generals who would lead Obama's surge in Afghanistan therefore accepted media embeds as a necessary evil if not exactly a boon to the military. In her early briefings on Operation Iraqi Freedom, Clarke was joined—

³⁹ Lindner (2009).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Emanuel (2007).

⁴¹ Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2007).

⁴² For example, see Tumber and Palmer (2004), 96-113; Pfau (2004); Aday, Livingston, and Hebert (2005); Aday (2010).

“I won’t quite say he volunteered,” she quipped to the Pentagon press corps—by Major General Stanley McChrystal, then the vice director of operations for the Joint Staff.⁴³ Six years later, as the four-star senior commander in Afghanistan, McChrystal maintained the open access policy adopted by his predecessors. This included having between 60 and 100 reporters, photographers, and videographers embedded with NATO military forces at any time between August 2009 and June 2010.⁴⁴ “Our readers, our reporters, and I personally greatly benefited from General McChrystal’s openness” and that of other command officials, said Roy Gutman—a Pulitzer Prize-winning international reporter and the foreign editor for McClatchy Newspapers, which maintained a bureau in Kabul that participated in frequent embeds. “It was, by my experience, as good as it gets.”⁴⁵

From senior commanders to troops in the field, however, access to the soldier’s perspective and the essential honesty of that perspective are different from the elusive standard of objectivity chased by many news media. In its 2003 annual report, the Committee to Protect Journalists concluded that the “close quarters shared by journalists and troops” in Iraq “inevitably blunted reporters’ critical edge. There were also limits on what types of stories reporters could cover, since the ground rules barred journalists from leaving their unit.”⁴⁶ The veteran national security correspondent and columnist David Ignatius warned readers in May 2010:

⁴³ Clarke, “DoD News Briefing” (2003).

⁴⁴ From unclassified weekly reports on media embeds submitted by the ISAF Joint Command to the author while assigned to the Headquarters ISAF public affairs office.

⁴⁵ Email exchange with the author, 8 October 2010.

⁴⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists (2004).

... embedding comes at a price. We are observing these wars from just one perspective, not seeing them whole. When you see my byline from Kandahar or Kabul or Basra, you should not think that I am out among everyday people, asking questions of all sides. I am usually inside an American military bubble. That vantage point has value, but it is hardly a full picture.⁴⁷

More interestingly, the embed policy's supporters in the defense community also became concerned that embeds skewed understanding of America's wars—although not in favor of US policy or military interests, as most journalists feared. Instead, as a 2004 RAND analysis had advised, defense officials worried that embeds would exaggerate tactical activities, fostering a number of detailed but disconnected views of a conflict and encouraging the micromanagement of military forces.⁴⁸ The dangers of tactical exaggeration surfaced in the summer of 2010, when the Pentagon voiced “concern about bleak accounts by journalists on the front-lines in southern Afghanistan” and “an excessive focus on violence and setbacks” that “ignored improvements there and in the rest of the country.”⁴⁹ Defense Secretary Robert Gates was reportedly troubled that “a wave of pessimism” in news reporting stemmed “partly from embedding journalists solely with military units in Afghanistan’s south.”⁵⁰ Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell told reporters the secretary thought embedded reporters provided a “very narrow perspective ... a soda straw’s view on the war... I have mused aloud about how can we find ways [th]at expose people to the broader picture in Afghanistan,” Morrel continued,

⁴⁷ Ignatius (2010).

⁴⁸ Paul and Kim (2004), 108-114.

⁴⁹ Entous and Stewart, “Afghan debate spotlights Pentagon's mixed messages” (2010).

⁵⁰ Entous, “Politics: Questions on Afghan strategy touch nerve in Pentagon” (2010).

because “there is a wider picture here that at least recently has been overtaken—overshadowed—by the intense focus on Helmand and Kandahar.”⁵¹

Soldiers as Victims or Villains: Handcuffed or Hard-Core?

As the Pentagon’s comments about the potential bias of embedded reporting suggest, news media deployed with US troops in the field challenged the administration’s narrative at the strategic and operational level. The strategy that Obama, Gates, McChrystal, and other senior officials insisted they had adopted was constructive: the creation of an Afghan state able to prevent its territory from once again becoming a terrorist safe haven. But many of the war stories that media told about soldiers—which in many cases reflected the stories soldiers told about themselves—were destructive. Afghanistan was a chaotic place where ceaseless violence crushed the spirit even when it failed to destroy the body. Those inclined to sympathize with soldiers often portrayed them as victims of their environment, trapped between Washington politics and a hostile country filled with an invisible enemy and passive or treacherous allies. Those who resisted the soldiers-as-victim theme frequently reversed the formula, placing soldiers in the role of eager or reluctant predators with Afghans in the role of their prey.

Force Protection: Soldiers as Victims. On 8 September 2009, McClatchy reporter Jonathan Landay was caught in an ambush while accompanying an early-morning patrol to the village of Ganjgal in the Shakani District of Kunar Province. “We walked into a trap, a killing zone of relentless

⁵¹ Morrell (2010).

gunfire and rocket barrages from Afghan insurgents hidden in the mountainsides and in a fortress-like village where women and children were replenishing their ammunition,” Landay wrote after surviving the attack.⁵² Three Marines and a Navy corpsman, members of an embedded training team working with the Afghan army, died during the firefight, and an Army sergeant died the following month after his body rejected a blood transfusion administered to treat wounds he received in the battle.⁵³ The Army “severely reprimanded” two Army officers stationed at nearby Forward Operating Base (FOB) Joyce after an investigation determined they contributed “directly to the loss of life” by refusing support requests from the team and failing to pass information about the engagement to higher headquarters.⁵⁴

As with many tragedies in war, the basic facts of the Ganjgal ambush and its aftermath became less important than how the event could be used to make larger points about the strategy. For Landay in the days immediately following the attack—which occurred almost three months before Obama’s decision to deploy an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan—the five American deaths could be attributed to a failure to supply soldiers with the resources they needed. “The lack of timely air support” to US and Afghan troops pinned down in Ganjgal, Landay argued, “was a consequence of the manpower and equipment shortages bequeathed by the Bush administration’s failure to secure Afghanistan against a resurgence of the Taliban, al Qaida and allied groups before turning to invade Iraq.”⁵⁵ In addition to the lack of helicopters operating in Kunar, Landay concluded that FOB Joyce denied

⁵² Landay, “We’re pinned down:’ 4 U.S. Marines die in Afghan ambush” (2009).

⁵³ Lamothe, “Rep. wants answers on Ganjgal ambush probe” (2010).

⁵⁴ Lamothe, “2 officers reprimanded over Ganjgal mistakes” (2011).

⁵⁵ Landay, “Deadly Afghan ambush shows perils of ill-supplied deployment” (2009).

artillery fire to troops at Ganjgal because McChrystal had imposed rules “intended to curb civilian casualties caused in part by his contingent’s reliance on artillery barrages and air strikes to compensate for their shortage of ground troops.”⁵⁶

Many of Ganjgal’s survivors and witnesses, in Landay’s words, viewed McChrystal’s tactical directive with “deep bitterness” and a feeling that they had been “unfairly handcuffed.”⁵⁷ “We basically screwed our guys over,” Marine Corporal Dakota Meyer told Landay. “They expect us to bring stuff to the fight, and [US commanders] didn’t give it to us.”⁵⁸ In the Army’s investigation of the attack, a scout squad leader with the 10th Mountain Division described the response by officers in the tactical operations center (TOC) as being one of indifference to the ambushed troops: “They ask for indirect and in return get 20 questions. The people in the TOC need to let the [redacted] do his thing and trust what he is asking for.”⁵⁹ An Army sniper who observed the ambush told investigators that “requests for air were made, and it kept getting pushed back... Repeatedly assets were requested for support but no asset urgency was shown.”⁶⁰

These concerns about restrictions on the use of force did not end with the Ganjgal attack. A June 2010 news analysis by *New York Times* reporter C.J. Chivers—a veteran of multiple embeds with American forces in eastern and southern Afghanistan—concluded: “Young officers and enlisted soldiers and Marines, typically speaking on the condition of anonymity to protect their jobs,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Lamothe, “More comments from grunts in the infamous Ganjgal ambush” (2010).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

speak of 'being handcuffed,' of not being trusted by their bosses and of being asked to battle a canny and vicious insurgency 'in a fair fight.'"⁶¹ Tactical guidance was blamed for prolonging firefights, preventing air or artillery support, and exposing ground troops to unnecessary risks—all in the interest of protecting Afghan civilians. Many of McChrystal's directives and discussions both at his headquarters and in the field were driven by his subordinates' concerns about dangers of implementing COIN doctrine, as discussed in the previous chapter. Although many commanders spent considerable time clearing up misconceptions about the guidance or explaining the need for restraint, it was clear that many soldiers remained unconvinced. "The troops hate it," one Army colonel told Chivers. "Right now, we're losing the tactical-level fight in the chase for a strategic victory. How long can that be sustained?"⁶²

The idea that soldiers are the victims of glory-seeking politicians, scheming special interests, or incompetent generals has a long history in the United States. During the Civil War, for example, soldiers on both sides declared that the conflict was a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight."⁶³ Although many soldiers voluntarily joined the Union or Confederate armies out of a sense of patriotism or personal honor, those sentiments were not absolute. Since a volunteer's honor emanated from his family, many Civil War soldiers did not consider desertion dishonorable if it was motivated by the need to help families struggling through poverty, illness, or death—even though such desertion had become a root cause for Confederate defeats even before the

⁶¹ Chivers (2010).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Nelson and Sheriff (2007), 199.

South's reversals at Gettysburg and Vicksburg.⁶⁴ An overall lack of Union volunteers from the state militia system prompted the federal government to institute state quotas and then a draft, which was resisted by violent riots in several major cities.⁶⁵ Soldiers steeped in the cultural ideal of manly virtue nevertheless often refused to brand fellow soldiers overcome by fear as cowards.⁶⁶ The tendency among many civilian and military officials was to explain a Civil War soldier's actions in terms of his victimization by war.

Although the identity of soldiers as victims could undermine the authority of the state by equating strategy with slaughter, the same sentiment could be exploited to the state's benefit when soldiers were romanticized as objects of sacrifice who accepted physical and mental suffering or a "good death" to spare others from victimhood.⁶⁷ This idea elevated the status of soldiers as a class, but it also diminished their authority as individual citizens. When battle became an act of sacrifice performed by a warrior caste, higher-ranking elites and the general public could dismiss soldiers' complaints about strategy as the understandable grumblings of a select group forced to endure necessary hardships for the collective good. Ironically, the assertion of soldiers' special status—which derived in part from the social bonds formed by fighting primarily for each other—wound up endorsing the kinds of mass political causes many soldiers rejected. The idea of a soldier's sacrifice implied he was fighting *for* something worthwhile, and federal and state governments during and after the Civil War quickly capitalized on that notion by improvising methods for identifying casualties, notifying loved ones, and establishing

⁶⁴ Ibid., 204. Williams (2005), 458.

⁶⁵ Williams (2005).

⁶⁶ Ibid., 224.

⁶⁷ Nelson and Sheriff (2007), 109-110.

military cemeteries and memorials that became symbolic centers of national and community life.⁶⁸

Particular aspects of the war in Afghanistan disrupted this traditional narrative cycle of American wars in important ways, making it more difficult for political and military elites to transform common soldiers from victims of random violence to objects of sacrifice toward a great if not always coherent national cause. In addition to the proliferation of news reports filed directly from combat units, improvements in battlefield medicine and transportation helped more injured troops survive the war. Whereas there were 1.29 soldiers killed for each one wounded in the Civil War, that ratio reversed itself in the twentieth century, with 1.65 troops wounded for each one killed in World War II, 2.82 wounded to killed in Korea, and 5.73 wounded to killed in Vietnam.⁶⁹ By February 2011, more than 6.67 military personnel were being wounded for each one killed in Afghanistan.⁷⁰

At the same time that higher percentages of soldiers were returning from war, the wounds they returned with were more visible to their communities. Physically, the widespread use of improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenades in Iraq and Afghanistan created one amputee for every 28 wounded troops. Although that percentage was roughly equal to the percentage of wounded amputees in Vietnam, it represented a higher percentage of living casualties—one amputee for every four to six deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq versus one for every 11 deaths in Vietnam—and it far surpassed the ratio of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Leland and Oboroceanu (2010), 2-3.

⁷⁰ iCasualties.org (2011).

amputees in both World War II and Korea.⁷¹ Mentally, the number of military personnel committing suicide rose steadily between 2005 and 2010. In 2009, the toll surpassed the relatively steady rate of civilian suicides for the first time since the Vietnam War.⁷² The stresses of war and attention to the military's obvious mental health problems raised the number of soldier hospitalizations based primarily on suicidal thoughts from just five in 2006 to 355 in 2010.⁷³

The upshot of these statistical developments was to make the evident victimization of soldiers a more prominent theme of elite discourse about the Afghanistan war. More soldiers were returning from the war with problems that a voyeuristic and progressive American culture wanted to expose and address rather than hide. Other elites therefore had a tougher time ennobling war veterans by speaking about them in terms of willing sacrifice rather than unfortunate victimhood.

Officials adapted to these changes with greater openness toward the uglier consequences of war for Afghanistan's veterans, although this openness was not always followed by either decisive government action or sustained elite interest in veteran issues. In February 2009, the Pentagon lifted an 18-year-old ban on transfer ceremonies at Dover Air Force Base, which resulted in a brief spike in news photos of the flag-draped coffins of troops killed in the conflict.⁷⁴ Major newspapers continued to cover military suicide rates and related mental health issues, which were dutifully tracked and reported by the Pentagon—a

⁷¹ Leland and Oboroceanu (2010), 9.

⁷² Bumiller, "Pentagon Report Places Blame for Suicides" (2010). O'Connor (2010).

⁷³ Thompson, "Suicidal Thoughts Up 7,000% As Reason For U.S. Military Hospitalizations Over Past Five Years" (2011).

⁷⁴ Bumiller, "Defense Chief Lifts Ban on Pictures of Coffins" (2009). For representative images, see *New York Times* photo essay "A Coffin, a Flag, a Photograph" (2009), and M. Wilson's *Life* photo essay "Army And Marine Casualties Of Afghanistan War Return To Dover AFB" (2009).

routine established after the *CBS Evening News* launched a two-part special report on an “epidemic” of suicides among veterans in November 2007.⁷⁵ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became the topic of an HBO documentary produced with DOD cooperation as well a number of best-selling mental health books recommended to military members and their families.⁷⁶ Media coverage of military amputees closely trailed interest in war deaths, suicides, and PTSD. As Paul Achter observes, however, the coverage of amputees often closed the circle of the soldier as victim narrative by recounting the victim’s progress back towards physical and mental well-being. Stories and images of amputees mostly placed them in “sporting contexts”—rehabilitation ending in a major achievement such as an athletic competition or a return to active military service—which reduced war injuries to “a small setback in an otherwise normal, and sometimes extraordinary, life.”⁷⁷

The overall effect of this discourse about soldiers as visible victims of violence in Afghanistan was public deference to the protection of soldiers as a key consideration of strategy. “I owe you a mission that is clearly defined, and worthy of your service,” Obama told West Point cadets in December 2009, justifying his extended strategy review as part of his responsibility to weigh “the terrible wages of war” on “a military that, along with your families, has already borne the heaviest of all burdens.”⁷⁸ While invoking his duty to look after the

⁷⁵ Keteyian (2007). For examples of periodic military suicide coverage from major newspapers, see Bumiller, “Pentagon Report Places Blame for Suicides” (2010); Zoroya (2010); Jaffe, “Army sees suicide decline overall, increase among Guard and Reserve soldiers” (2011).

⁷⁶ Alpert and Kent (2010). Books related to PTSD ranked in the Amazon.com Top 100 for mental health in January 2011 included Friedman and Slone (2008) and Schiraldi (2009).

⁷⁷ Achter (2010), 56 and 59.

⁷⁸ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (December 2009).

soldier's interests rather than the soldier's duty to serve the country's interest, the president acknowledged the inevitability of separation, injury, and death. If the job of war was undertaken, the wages needed to be paid.

The dispute about rules of engagement emerging from the Ganjgal ambush and other violent episodes, however, seemed to go several steps farther by suggesting that the US strategy needed to remove risk from the battlefield. This represented a curious retreat back in the direction of the technological, bloodless war from above that Army and Marine advocates had derided in their push for a more COIN-capable force.⁷⁹ Soldiers in Afghanistan always retained the right of self-defense. What they sought by promoting a looser interpretation of their tactical guidance was the ability to attack their attackers more quickly with overwhelming force. This was less a question of interpreting written guidance than of communicating with the people providing the extra firepower and prioritizing limited air and artillery assets. As one network correspondent—who was close to the action during numerous embeds but also regularly covering the political fallout from military violence in Kabul and Washington—concluded:

The [rules of engagement] debate is probably the most ridiculous debate I have witnessed during my two years in Afghanistan... As one Marine explained it, "We don't have to win the first 15 minutes of a battle." He went on to explain that US and coalition forces have more resources and can wait out a battle. Years of busting down doors, blowing up the wrong buildings, and killing innocent civilians has put more US troops in danger than not being able to call in an airstrike to kill a few insurgents. The cumulative effect

⁷⁹ See previous chapter.

of overly aggressive tactics is a stronger and larger Taliban enemy.⁸⁰

Regardless, many elites continued to revisit the issue of battlefield restrictions in an effort to be seen to be doing something to prevent more soldiers from becoming victims. For example, no fewer than seven senators questioned General David Petraeus about the issue during his confirmation hearing. Yet the questions were asked and answered in terms of correcting *perceptions* of victimhood, because the real source of risk—putting soldiers in a violent situation with the resources the nation had to hand—was something neither the senators nor Petraeus put up for debate. In a typical comment about the restrictions placed on soldiers, Senator Jim Webb, a Marine veteran of Vietnam and the father of a Marine who had served in Iraq, told Petraeus “there are no circumstances, none, in which we should put our people unreasonably at risk where they cannot take actions in order to protect themselves. And there’s a perception out there among a lot of military people that that has occurred...”⁸¹ Petraeus assured the committee, “I am keenly aware of concerns by some of our troopers on the ground about the application of our rules of engagement and the tactical directive. They should know that I will look very hard at this issue.”⁸² The general declared:

... we have to be absolutely certain that the implementation of the tactical directive and the rules of engagement is even throughout the force, that there are not leaders at certain levels that are perhaps making this more bureaucratic or more restrictive than necessary when our troopers and our Afghan partners are in a tough spot. And when they are in a tough spot, it’s a moral

⁸⁰ Email exchange with the author, 16 October 2010. The quote has been rendered anonymously at the correspondent’s request.

⁸¹ US Senate, Senate Armed Services Committee (June 2010).

⁸² Ibid.

imperative that we use everything we have to ensure that they get out of it.⁸³

Whether it was noble or expedient to invoke this obligation to troops while resolving to put more of them in harm's way, the clear implication of the need for the invocation itself was that the legitimacy of national strategy could not rest on elite assumptions about the voluntary sacrifice of soldiers for the general purposes of American security or the progress of liberty. Instead, the worthiness of the cause needed to be understood, evaluated, and explained—at least in part—through soldiers' eyes. This task became more difficult when media focused on narrow aspects of the military experience in Afghanistan, or when claims to operational security or secrecy barred broader discussion of important tactical issues.

After members of Congress received a confidential briefing on the rules of engagement that Petraeus had publicly promised to examine a few months earlier, a critic of the restrictions told the *Marine Corps Times*, "The suggestion that you can't openly discuss the rules of engagement is ridiculous. The bloody Taliban knows what they are."⁸⁴ That critic was John Bernard—a retired Marine who rose to public prominence after the Associated Press published a controversial photo of his dying son Joshua, who was fatally wounded in Helmand Province in August 2009.⁸⁵ The case is one example of how the push and pull of military and media collaboration on war coverage, intended to reflect the varied experiences and insights of US troops, wound up defining a fairly

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Lamothe, "Congress briefed on rules of engagement" (2010).

⁸⁵ Associated Press, "Associated Press says photo of Lance Cpl. Joshua Bernard shows realities of war" (2009).

narrow and specific range of victimizing battlefield experiences that informed public debates.

Hunting Muj: Soldiers as Victims or Villains? Crucially, what mattered most to many observers of the tactical situation in Afghanistan was the authenticity of the soldier's voice, which was firmly linked to the business of killing and being killed. In the imagination of some elites, soldiers were a different breed, unknown and perhaps unknowable to their political masters or the peaceful citizens they served. Certainly the circumstances of fighting in Afghanistan contributed to this idea of separation. The troops who would do most of the fighting were, as Junger wrote, dropped "on a hilltop without women, hot food, running water, communication with the outside world, or any kind of entertainment for over a year."⁸⁶ But the separation of soldiers from American society was more than a matter of geography or personal comfort. It was a matter of conscience, because troops in Afghanistan—unlike those in some other wars—*chose* this life. As Junger observes, this complicated the idea that soldiers were victims simply by virtue of being placed in a violent situation:

Vietnam was considered a morally dubious war that was fought by draftees while the rest of the nation was dropping acid and listening to Jimi Hendrix. Afghanistan, on the other hand, was being fought by volunteers who more or less respected their commanders and had the gratitude of the vast majority of Americans back home. If you imagined that your job, as a reporter, was to buddy up to the troops and tell the "real" story of how they were dying in a senseless war, you were in for a surprise. The commanders would realize you were operating off a particular kind of cultural programming and would try to change your mind, but the men wouldn't bother. They'd just refuse to talk to you until you left their base.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Junger (2010), 154.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 133-134.

If American troops had to endure hardships and perils because they had committed themselves to the soldier's life, then in a sense they could be victims of war only to the extent that the war's strategy or military doctrine and training divorced them from the rough dictates of that life. This idea reversed the conventional wisdom that soldiers follow orders to argue that orders must follow an ideal conception of soldiering. In his influential book on American fighting in Korea, *This Kind of War*, retired Army Colonel T.R. Fehrenbach concluded:

However repugnant the idea is to liberal societies, the man who will willingly defend the free world in the fringe areas is not the responsible citizen-soldier. The man who will go where the colors go, without asking, who will fight a phantom foe in jungle and mountain range, without counting, and who will suffer and die in the midst of incredible hardship, without complaint, is still what he has always been, from Imperial Rome to sceptered Britain to democratic America. He is the stuff of which legions are made.⁸⁸

For Fehrenbach, the bloodshed and uncertain conclusion of the Korean War resulted from the betrayal of the warrior ideal. The United States had learned the hard way "that the postwar world was not the pleasant place they hoped it would be, that it could not be neatly policed by bombers and carrier aircraft and nuclear warheads, and that the Communist menace could be disregarded only at extreme peril."⁸⁹ American forces "were not ready" for Korea, "either in body or in spirit," because they "had not really realized the kind of world they lived in, or the tests of wills they might face, or the disciplines that would be required to win them."⁹⁰ The strategy in Korea failed because American leaders

⁸⁸ Fehrenbach (1963), 455.

⁸⁹ Ibid., ix.

⁹⁰ Ibid., x.

rejected the basic fundamentals of warfare. Politicians and generals did not prepare or employ their legions as legions.

Among soldiers serving in Afghanistan and their retired or civilian supporters, suspicion or contempt about legal limits on the use of force echoed Fehrenbach's concern that social liberalism was a form of victimization. This opinion is expressed succinctly in the title of the blog John Bernard dedicated to his dead son and the cause of relaxing operational constraints: "Let Them Fight or Bring Them Home!"⁹¹ It is also a central critique of US strategy in West's *The Wrong War*, where the Vietnam veteran praises American troops who "don't need a patriotic war or sacrifices by the public. We cannot explain why they choose the rough life. They march to a different drummer. They like to fight and are highly skilled at it."⁹²

In West's telling, hard-core warriors struggle for success against equivocating politicians and military officers who have grown soft. There are "too many smart staff officers with ample spare time to second-guess the details" of tactical operations.⁹³ "Advocacy of enlightened counterinsurgency sprouted into a social network that boosted the careers of military officers comfortable with academic theories"—that is, those who were by implication averse to fighting.⁹⁴ The result was a strategy that "persuaded many commanders that they did not have to fight to kill a tough enemy."⁹⁵ Such an approach eschewed "aggressiveness, due to fear of the political consequences of

⁹¹ Bernard (2009).

⁹² West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 253.

⁹³ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 249.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 244.

friendly or civilian casualties,” and “diminished the primacy of the military’s core competency—violence.”⁹⁶ “War centered upon killing,” West writes:

The grunts knew that, even if their own generals did not. Killing was not the solution, but it was the means to the solution. When generals bemoaned killing, they were trying to make themselves seem morally and intellectually enlightened, while indicating the shallow understanding of what their own grunts were doing day after day.⁹⁷

In this kind of muscular prose, West dutifully reflects the views of frustrated men under fire. “We have to kill enough bad guys and remove their leaders before things will change,” as a company commander in the Korengal tells him.⁹⁸

West’s perspective is not untrue, but like many war stories it is exaggerated—perhaps to the detriment of his beloved grunts. The raw expression of the daily *necessity* of military violence in Afghanistan easily fed legitimate concerns about *excessive* military violence. In response to a 2006 survey on the mental health of US forces in Iraq, Petraeus published an open letter to his troops in which he defined the warrior *ethos* as grounded in the discriminate use of force:

We are, indeed, warriors. We train to kill our enemies. We are engaged in combat, we must pursue the enemy relentlessly, and we must be violent at times. What sets us apart from our enemies in this fight, however, is how we behave. In everything we do, we must observe the standards and values that dictate that we treat noncombatants and detainees with dignity and respect.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Sgt. S. Wood (2007).

This nuance faded in war stories that glorified combat to the extent that anything short of complete and unquestioned dedication to the art and science of killing represented a weakness that must be purged from the ranks. “We hunt muj,” one platoon sergeant in the Korengal explained to West. “If a soldier doesn’t want to do that, he doesn’t belong.”¹⁰⁰ It was a short step from soldiers’ pride in their skill as predators to allegations that they were murderers.

Throughout 2009 and 2010, elites monitoring escalating violence in Afghanistan continued to weigh the prospect that soldiers were behaving as villains. Statistically, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drew qualified praise for efforts to limit civilian casualties. For example, a United Nations mid-year report comparing the first six months of 2010 to the same period in 2009 noted a “30 per cent drop in the number of casualties attributed to” ISAF and Afghan government forces, which was “driven by a 64 per cent decline in deaths and injuries caused by aerial attacks.”¹⁰¹ But news media, human rights groups, and others were quick to point out contrary data, including an increase in the number of Afghan civilians shot at checkpoints.¹⁰²

The tension between the themes of soldier as villain and soldier as victim played out most obviously in the cases of night raids by Special Operations Forces (SOF). As the former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)—a position in which he spent five years on efforts to capture or kill enemy leaders, including al Qaeda’s top commander in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—McChrystal could have been expected to value the military’s ability to target terrorists and insurgents. As one soldier serving in Kandahar bluntly

¹⁰⁰ West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 25.

¹⁰¹ United Nations News Service (2010).

¹⁰² Oppel, “Tighter Rules Fail to Stem Deaths of Innocent Afghans at Checkpoints” (2010).

told *Rolling Stone*, “when I came over here and heard that McChrystal was in charge, I thought we would get our fucking gun on.”¹⁰³ Instead, McChrystal’s heavy emphasis on protecting the Afghan population through constrained violence surprised some of his troops and outside observers.

The general’s position on civilian casualties—and his parallel effort to gain tighter operational control of SOF in Afghanistan—is more understandable when judged against the effects of some of the raids. On 26 December 2009, an Afghan SOF unit stormed what was presumed to be a Taliban training facility in Kunar Province and instead killed nine students in what turned out to be a religious school. A raid near Gardez in Paktia Province on 12 February 2010 killed a local police chief, a district prosecutor, and three women—two of them pregnant. Just nine days later, SOF directed a helicopter attack in Oruzgan Province that killed 27 civilians traveling in three trucks. An anonymous NATO official who reviewed video of the attack told the *New York Times* what he saw “would not have led me to pull the trigger.”¹⁰⁴ On 28 April 2010, SOF raided the home of a member of the Afghan Parliament, Safia Sediqi, in eastern Nangarhar Province, killing one of her relatives by marriage.¹⁰⁵

Regardless of the potential merits of each of these missions at the time of its conception, the cumulative political consequences of night raids were significant. ISAF’s initial claim that “several insurgents” were killed in the Gardez raid and that the dead women were found “tied up, gagged and killed” in a room was contradicted first by family members and then by Afghan investigators, who told London’s *The Times* that “US special forces soldiers dug

¹⁰³ Hastings (2010).

¹⁰⁴ Quote and attack details taken from Oppel and Nordland, “U.S. Is Reining In Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹⁰⁵ Sherzad (2010).

bullets out of their victims' bodies ... then washed the wounds with alcohol before lying to their superiors about what happened.”¹⁰⁶ The JSOC commander, Vice Admiral William H. McRaven, later called the raid a “terrible mistake” when he met with the family of the Gardez victims to ask their forgiveness and pay an estimated \$30,000 in reparations.¹⁰⁷ In Nangarhar, Sediqi blamed deaths from multiple raids in her district on “the enemies of the Americans ... feeding them bad information,” and she participated in protests where Afghans paraded the bodies of the dead, burned an American flag, and shouted “Long live the Taliban.”¹⁰⁸ Spokesmen for both the Afghan Ministry of Defense and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan complained that SOF operated with limited accountability, provoking greater hostility against the United States and the Afghan government.¹⁰⁹

In a widely read 2010 memoir of his rise and fall as a Taliban official, Abdul Salam Zaeef describes the view of night raids shared by many Afghans:

... when the American invaders target an Afghan they believe to be an enemy according to their puppet spies' reports, first they identify his house in a village. Then in the middle of the night they land with their helicopters. The American soldiers raid the house. Prior to entering the house, they blow up the gate instead of knocking, they strip the person they are targeting in front of his wife and family. They search women and they break open boxes instead of unlocking them. Then they take the person away like wild animals, or they just kill him with bullets or knives in front of his wife and children, in his own house.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Starkey, “Nato ‘covered up’ botched night raid in Afghanistan that killed five” (2010). Starkey, “US special forces ‘tried to cover-up’ botched Khataba raid in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹⁰⁷ Starkey, “US army chief begs Afghans to forgive” (2010).

¹⁰⁸ Nordland, “Afghans Protest Deadly U.S. Raid” (2010).

¹⁰⁹ Oppel and Nordland, “U.S. Is Reining In Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹¹⁰ Zaeef (2010), 241.

This account reflects a clear bias that denies the possibilities that the targets of raids could be truly violent people or that tactical surprise could limit bloodshed. But it is exactly this kind of bias against American forces and their allies that fostered the continued local and regional instability that US strategy was intended in part to correct.

Two limitations imposed on official communication increased the ambiguity and anger surrounding civilian deaths and facilitated elite discourse about the possible villainy of US troops. The first was an extraordinary concern for operational security, especially in regard to SOF missions. McChrystal recognized the need for greater transparency and made limited progress in quelling Afghan resentment by opening up some of ISAF's more secretive operations. In May 2010, for example, both President Hamid Karzai and groups of Afghan parliamentarians toured a SOF command center and the American detention facility in Parwan, where they discussed night raids and the treatment of prisoners. "There are lots of rumors that Americans torture prisoners during interrogation," Fazlullah Mojadeddi, a lawmaker from Logar Province, told the Associated Press after his visit. "That was not true. They have good living conditions and time to pray and read books."¹¹¹

Despite modest improvements along these lines, there were limits to transparency in terms of both the persistent habits of government secrecy and the inevitable frictions caused by continued violence. Detention operations were opened to news media in 2010 under restrictive conditions, but SOF

¹¹¹ Vogt, "US prison in Afghanistan to hold first trial" (2010). The author was part of the group of military personnel, Afghan officials, and news media accompanying the trips by Karzai and the first group of parliamentarians. News media were not permitted to cover the portion of the itinerary dealing with special operations, which is therefore undocumented. But those discussions did take place in conjunction with the reported trips to the Parwan detention facility.

missions remained off limits—reported through a reliance on anonymous leaks, rumors, and guesswork. Petraeus and others insisted on the necessity of the operations, providing impressive but unverifiable statistics to suggest that covert raids and air strikes were having significant effects on al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents.¹¹²

Still, the unintended consequence of secrecy about individual missions—as the *New Yorker's* Jon Lee Anderson put it in a report from Khost Province—was “an atmosphere of suspicion that makes collaboration” between Americans and Afghans “very difficult to achieve.”¹¹³ Karzai told the *Washington Post* in November 2010 that the “time has come to reduce military operations.” Night raids “are a problem always,” Karzai said. “The Afghan people don’t like these raids, if there is any raid it has to be done by the Afghan government within the Afghan laws.”¹¹⁴ Petraeus reportedly expressed “astonishment and disappointment” at the Afghan president’s remarks, and an anonymous NATO military official insisted that “we would not be as far along as we are pressuring the network had it not been for these very precision operations we do at night... I don’t see any near-term alternative to this kind of operation.”¹¹⁵ The lack of a more transparent alternative became a source of even greater personal and political tension with Karzai in March 2011, when an elderly cousin of his father was killed during a raid in Khost.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Gall, “Petraeus Sees Military Progress in Afghanistan” (2011).

¹¹³ Anderson (2011), 101.

¹¹⁴ Partlow, “Karzai wants U.S. to reduce military operations in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹¹⁵ Petraeus reaction as reported in Partlow and DeYoung, “Petraeus warns Afghans about Karzai’s criticism of U.S. war strategy” (2010). NATO official quoted in Partlow, “Karzai wants U.S. to reduce military operations in Afghanistan” (2010).

¹¹⁶ Sameem and Robinson (2011).

Even when military officials were willing to mitigate suspicions about the reasons for violence by testing the limits of operational security, transparency on civilian casualty incidents still collided with a second major obstacle: Western legal norms designed to protect the rights of troops who might face disciplinary action or criminal charges. In September 2009—after indications that an ISAF air strike on a stranded fuel truck hijacked by insurgents near Kunduz may have killed a large but undetermined number of civilians—McChrystal issued a personal statement to Afghan radio and television stations, dubbed in both Dari and Pashtu, acknowledging the incident and declaring, “I take this possible loss of life or injury to innocent Afghans very seriously.”¹¹⁷ The ISAF commander dispatched a team to Kunduz to gather more information than the brief operational reports by the German unit responsible for the attack provided. He also allowed a *Washington Post* reporter, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, to accompany the team to provide independent confirmation that the coalition was following up on its pledge to examine the strike.¹¹⁸

Afghan and international observers generally gave McChrystal high marks for his response to the Kunduz bombing, which was the first major test of his commitment to reducing civilian casualties. “There has been a marked difference in the way the U.S. military dealt with this incident,” a senior UN official concluded at the time. “Instead of arguing about the number of casualties, as has happened in the past, they recognized the Afghan perception and addressed it.”¹¹⁹ Taliban calls for international condemnation of the attack

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Chandrasekaran, “NATO Probing Deadly Airstrike” (2009).

¹¹⁸ Chandrasekaran, “Sole Informant Guided Decision On Afghan Strike” (2009).

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Constable (2009).

largely went unheeded, and local Afghan officials went as far as blaming the Taliban for provoking the attack.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, German officials were angered by the transparency of the ISAF response. “It is improper for a NATO commander to put the safety and also the lives of German soldiers in danger by going public and prematurely giving the impression that civilians were killed,” Harald Kujat, a former chief of staff of the German armed forces, told N24 television news. “I sincerely hope that the new NATO secretary general will have the spine and also the authority in leadership to call this general to order.”¹²¹ The German defense minister, Franz Josef Jung, claimed the strike was “absolutely necessary” and that “only Taliban terrorists” were killed—an assertion he withdrew the following day.¹²² German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that she would not tolerate “prejudgement” of the bombing “either at home or abroad.”¹²³ When press reports revealed that Jung and his military chief of staff essentially ignored early reports of civilian casualties in a rush to deny the German military’s culpability for the attack, both resigned, and Merkel endured a political scandal over the alleged cover-up.¹²⁴

The fallout from SOF night raids and the Kunduz strike demonstrate the perils of standard official communication about military mistakes. Information about violent deaths almost always becomes public in one form or another. When facts surface, the information typically provided at the tactical level—

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Quoted in Whitlock, “In Germany, Political Turmoil Over Ordering Of Airstrike” (2009).

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Quoted in *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* and *L’Agence France-Presse*, “Merkel defends German mission in Afghanistan” (2009).

¹²⁴ Sengupta (2009).

terse, jargon-laden message traffic based on sketchy initial reports that lack independent confirmation—is easily dismissed or recast as an exercise in evasion through euphemisms, deliberate omissions, or outright deception. Likewise, official expressions of concern about withholding information in order to respect proper legal or administrative procedures for the living can be portrayed as cynical efforts to avoid political embarrassment or responsibility. In the absence of sufficient transparency on verifiable facts and results from promised investigations, even honest efforts to protect soldiers from rash accusations of villainy can wind up incriminating both individual soldiers and government institutions.

Yet the instinct of American elites to deny that US soldiers can become villains remains strong, even after public disclosures of horrible acts. When Army Specialist Jeremy Morlock and other members of the 5th Stryker Brigade were publicly charged with killing Afghan civilians for sport, the Army directed evidence photos provided to defense attorneys to be returned in an apparent effort to limit news coverage of the gruesome case, which by then was a matter of public record. An attorney for an Army whistle-blower denied an interview already scheduled with CNN, saying his client had been granted immunity “contingent ... on staying away from the media.”¹²⁵ An Army spokesman insisted these steps met the “imperative [to] follow judicial process in order to provide the accused a fair and impartial trial, while at the same time serve justice.”¹²⁶ For its scrupulous defense of legal procedure, the Army received a rebuke from CNN describing the service as “scrambling to contain the news of an apparently out-of-control platoon” and accusing the institution of trying to

¹²⁵ Griffin and Johnston (2010).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

“silence” the whistle-blower—first through beatings by his fellow soldiers, then by the immunity offer.¹²⁷ At least some of the photos were published by *Der Spiegel* and *Rolling Stone* while trials of the accused were still underway.¹²⁸

When Lieutenant William Calley Jr. was convicted of premeditated murder and sentenced to life in prison for his role in the My Lai massacre in 1971, mass protests erupted and President Richard Nixon released Calley to house arrest. This public and political response in the midst of the unpopular Vietnam War was not repeated for American soldiers facing similar fates for their actions in the controversial but less opposed wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. As Luke Mogelson observed in a feature article in the *New York Times Magazine* a month after Morlock was sentenced, citing an argument by the sociologist and war crimes specialist Stjepan Mestrovic:

If we lack a sense of collective responsibility for these more recent war crimes, Mestrovic blames this on our readiness to believe that such occasional iniquities are aberrations perpetrated by a derelict few, rather than the inevitable result of institutional failures and, more generally, the nature of the conflicts in which we are engaged. It is much easier to accept the assessment of the officer who told [an Army investigator] that the Fifth Brigade had “absolutely the worst command climate I have ever operated under” but that nonetheless “nothing about the unit climate led to the killings ... that was simply the work of a sociopath.”¹²⁹

Thus the violence in Afghanistan that resulted from either human negligence or inhuman evil could be wrapped in at least three layers of narrative victimhood. Information about violent acts was deleted or diluted to

¹²⁷ Ibid. The reach of the story was determined by a Google search of the whistle-blower’s name, Private 1st Class Justin Stoner, with a date range within 24 hours of the CNN report.

¹²⁸ *Der Spiegel*, “Photo Gallery: The ‘Kill Team’ in Afghanistan” (2011). *Rolling Stone*, “The Kill Team Photos” (2011).

¹²⁹ Mogelson (2011).

protect soldiers from becoming the victims of critics eager to condemn them before all the facts were in. When such information did surface, those willing to overlook the individual to attack the institution could consider soldiers as the victims of a military culture that had turned them into killers. But the military held a trump card. When the Army paid a price for the violent behavior of soldiers, officials could claim the institution itself was the victim of leaders and citizens willing to turn their backs on the legions sent forth to do the nation's dirty work.

In the end, the conflicting representations of soldiers in media war stories reflected the unresolved elite conflicts over strategy and doctrine described in previous chapters. As W. Lance Bennett observed of political discourse in general, the viewpoints of soldiers were “‘indexed’ (admitted through news gates) according to the magnitude and content of conflicts among key government decision-makers or other players with the power (as perceived by journalistic insiders) to affect the development of a story.”¹³⁰ Elites who generally supported US strategy in Afghanistan alternated between describing soldiers as sacrificial heroes or victims of war who sometimes made fatal mistakes. Skeptics or committed critics were not certain whether to attribute suspected villainy to individual deviance or to systematically predatory organizations or policies that victimized soldiers and Afghans alike. In this way, elite discourse about soldiers as victims or villains circled endlessly back on itself as long as Americans and Afghans continued to die.

¹³⁰ Bennett (1996), 377.

Afghans as Victims or Villains: Helpless or Hopeless?

War stories about Afghans also enlisted the competing identities of victim and villain in order to argue the merits of US strategy. Within American public discourse, the key difference between stories about soldiers and stories about Afghans were the barriers of language and culture that prevented the direct representation of the Afghan point of view. The stories of Afghans were told almost exclusively from the outside looking in, which meant that they often entered elite discourse by way of questionable assumptions about the Afghan people.

In *War Without Mercy*, the historian John Dower argues that American discourse about the Japanese operated in a “middle-register” of prejudice that was not as dense and nuanced as the opinions about race that some elites expressed in private, nor was it as reflexive as simple race hatred or as cynical as political manipulation of pure racism.¹³¹ Instead, by attempting to convey a few ideas about the Japanese for a specific effect—building and sustaining public support for the war—elites relied on easily communicated stereotypes derived from evidence. The form of stereotype most commonly associated with wartime propaganda demonized the enemy by contradicting false claims, arguing “you are the opposite of what you say you are and the opposite of us, not peaceful but warlike, not good but bad.”¹³² A second form of stereotype promoted the idea that “you are what you say you are, but that itself is

¹³¹ Dower (1986), 27-28.

¹³² Ibid., 30.

reprehensible.”¹³³ In this form of discourse, acknowledged cultural virtues such as simplicity, patient endurance, or sacrifice for the collective good could be relayed in more ominous terms as immaturity, silent deviousness, or suicidal fanaticism.¹³⁴ But even ostensibly objective attempts to understand the Japanese as a whole—to make them a “more complex people in Western eyes”—could give “a patina of credibility to the impression that the Japanese were unique in unattractive ways, almost totally lacking in diversity or individuality.”¹³⁵ Indeed, the idea that the differences between Japan and America were so profound that they needed to be studied and explained at length by experts reinforced the perception that the Japanese were fundamentally strange, inscrutable, or irrational.¹³⁶

Of course, America was not at war with the Afghan people, but it was at war with a significant minority of the Afghan population engaged in the insurgent cause. This fact, combined with the tendency to rely on metaphors that generalized distinctions between Western and Eastern or secular and Islamic cultures helped discourse about Afghans drift toward negative stereotypes seen in America’s earlier wars in Asia. The idea of Afghans as sacrificial heroes for their country, which had been effectively co-opted by insurgents under the concept of religious martyrdom, was rejected by many Western observers. Instead, elites promoted the idea that Afghans were what they said they were—helpless victims of violence and political conspiracy. Some commentators and analysts went beyond the idea that Afghans were helpless to the idea that they were hopeless, mired in a cultural and economic

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 55-57

¹³⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 96.

backwardness that prevented reform. From here, it was easy to argue that Afghans were in fact *not* what they said they were, since they held out the promise of stability or liberalization they never could achieve for the purpose of selfish gain.

Many military and civilian officials who were invested in building Afghanistan's capacity to provide independent security and governance did recognize that Afghans had to become the heroes of their own stories. Consequently, they took pains to note the mounting sacrifices of Afghan security forces. Questioned about the loyalty of Afghan fighters in a December 2009 discussion with Kabul reporters, for example, McChrystal emphasized they were heroic, both in the subjective sense of what each individual had risked by serving the government and in the objective sense of the casualties they suffered:

If you put yourself in the position of a young policeman in an area that is very difficult, that suffers from challenges to security every day, it's a difficult position to be in—particularly if your family lives slightly away from that in an area that's not under government control. Suddenly you have your family at risk, you are periodically at risk, and yet we ask an extraordinary amount of these young men. They die at a higher rate than anyone else in this fight. When people talk about coalition forces here dying for Afghanistan, that's true. But Afghans die for Afghanistan more than coalition forces do. Afghan police die more than Afghan army do, because they are out there.¹³⁷

A few months later, McChrystal reminded a group of European reporters that there were “young Afghan army soldiers down fighting every day in places like Marja” as well as “Afghan national police holding checkpoints all around the country and dying at a higher rate than any other force on the battlefield and

¹³⁷ McChrystal, author's transcript of discussion with bureau chiefs and senior foreign correspondents (December 2009).

not running away.”¹³⁸ Although such statements were regular, they were not particularly resonant.

One reason that elites rarely discussed the heroic sacrifice of Afghan soldiers and police is that the market on sacrifice had been effectively cornered in a conflict framed as the United States versus al Qaeda and the Taliban. On the American side, there was the narrative of selfless sacrifice blending into victimhood already discussed—what McChrystal referred to as the dominant paradigm of “coalition forces here dying for Afghanistan.” Likewise, the discourse of Afghan Taliban and Arab jihadists was grounded in martyrdom to the cause of overthrowing Kabul’s corrupt government and re-establishing an Islamic state. Taliban fighters recounting the movement’s resurgence for a *Newsweek* correspondent, for example, described themselves as “once proud *jihadis*” reduced by “the Americans and the traitors allied with them” to the status of “homeless beggar’s” living off the “people’s charity.”¹³⁹ Staying true to the cause was an act of self-sacrifice, “like wearing a jacket of fire. You have to leave your family and live with the knowledge that you can be killed at any time.”¹⁴⁰ Although outmatched by US military technology, the example of martyrs leaves surviving fighters “strangely exhilarated. We showed our resolve by fighting, by taking a stand. We knew we’d be back.”¹⁴¹

In comparison to the routine rhetorical elevation of American soldiers and their insurgent opponents, Afghan forces usually were seen to be lacking the heroic essentials of warfare. “They got thrown into the fire without a whole

¹³⁸ McChrystal, author’s transcript of discussion with NATO-sponsored European media representatives (February 2010).

¹³⁹ Yousafzai, “The Taliban in Their Own Words” (2009).

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

lot of collective training,” as a US Army company commander in the Zhari District of Kandahar described his Afghan counterparts to the *New York Times*. “We’re going over basic soldiering skills. Learning while at the same time doing combat operations is very tough.”¹⁴² Although this and similar remarks pointed to the concrete challenges of expanding security in a short time, other comments suggested that the deficiencies of Afghans were less material than moral—that is, a result of inherent defects of character.

At times, doubts about Afghan forces could be expressed as qualified admiration of a warrior’s heart constrained by social backwardness. “These are born fighters,” NATO’s lead trainer, Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell IV, explained to ABC News in January 2010. “What they are not used to do is working in a collective group.”¹⁴³ “In an American sense,” an American brigade commander confided to the *New York Times*, the training of Afghan forces was “going slower than I personally would like. But if you look at it from an Afghan standpoint, they are moving with great speed, or they perceive that they are. That’s a difference in cultures.”¹⁴⁴ At other times, however, military observers concluded that progress was less a question of primitivism than a complete absence of the moral qualities of an effective army. While “the Taliban narrative wove together the Pashtun warrior spirit and a jihadist duty to drive out infidel invaders,” West writes, “Afghan security forces usually fought for paychecks.”¹⁴⁵ Western soldiers “were professionals,” in West’s estimation, and “the Taliban were ideologues. The Afghan army was neither. It was not professional, and

¹⁴² Morgan (2010).

¹⁴³ ABC News, “Transcript of World News Tonight with Diane Sawyer” (January 2010).

¹⁴⁴ Morgan (2010).

¹⁴⁵ West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 24.

thus able to prevail by superior skill. And it was not ideological, and thus able to prevail by dedication to cause.”¹⁴⁶

Just as discourse about the mindless, violent obedience of Japanese soldiers in World War II was a distortion of the values of honor, loyalty, and deference in Japanese culture, concerns about the quality of Afghans as allies was a dark reflection of their own obsession with victimhood. Afghans “are the victims of the Taliban, but we are also the victims of the foreigners who destroy a whole village just to get one of them,” a resident of Kabul complained to the *Washington Post* shortly after the errant bombing in Kunduz.¹⁴⁷ “Afghanistan is the most oppressed country in the world,” Zaeef declares in his memoir, which reads in part as a book-length litany of the betrayal of Afghanistan by Pakistan, the United States, and much of the rest of the world. “The primary goal of the invasion was to render Afghanistan powerless.”¹⁴⁸ Even as international attention to the plight of Afghans led to substantial increases in foreign aid in 2009, Zaeef argued that suspicious southern Afghans considered generosity one more source of their perpetual victimization:

Many Kandaharis were suffering. There is little work, and unemployment is a big problem, they complained. The Americans are only here to spend donors’ money on themselves, and only the Afghans who helped facilitate this are making a profit. Foreign aid is killing Afghans, they said.¹⁴⁹

Demonstrating that even Afghan officials in power were willing to trade on their identity as victims to the point of alienating their allies, President Karzai marked the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by insisting that Afghanistan

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 148.

¹⁴⁷ Constable (2009).

¹⁴⁸ Zaeef (2010), 231.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., xlii.

bore little responsibility for violence against other nations. “The villages of Afghanistan are not the origins and the sanctuaries of terrorists,” Karzai said. “Innocent Afghan people should not be the victims in the fight against terrorism.”¹⁵⁰ The Afghan population was threatened from without, not from within.

Undeniably, Afghans had reason to protest that their country had been mistreated by Britain, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, the United States and others throughout much of its recent history. But verbal and visual media discourse about the victimization of Afghans did little to advance the elite debate. Reviewing visual images from Afghanistan in the months after the 9/11 attacks, Brigitte Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna concluded that Afghan men were portrayed as products of a violent tribal culture—primarily through the proliferation of photos of boys or young men carrying guns. In contrast, women and children were displayed as victims of subjugation.¹⁵¹

Nine years of images from the war did little to change that narrative, except maybe to heighten perceptions of Afghan passivity rather than aggression. Associated Press photos taken in February and July 2010 in Helmand, Kandahar, and Kabul provinces were representative of most contemporary images of Afghans: young men staring blankly or menacingly at the camera as they clutch weapons; angry protestors standing in front of flaming wreckage; dead or disarmed insurgents lying prostrate near heavily armed US troops; older men or children crying, running, or staring into space,

¹⁵⁰ Stojanovic (2010).

¹⁵¹ Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007), 46-47.

often with American soldiers in the foreground or background.¹⁵² A *Foreign Policy* photo essay on failed states entitled “Postcards from Hell” symbolized Afghanistan with three women shrouded in *burqas* standing on a dusty Kabul street where a bomb had just exploded.¹⁵³

There were exceptions to these visual tropes. The AP photos referenced above included more tranquil scenes of market life and children at play. A group of Kabul teenagers armed with cameras produced photos—published by *Foreign Policy* in 2010—of “culture, friends, and daily life” in the capital—“not car bombings and kidnappings.”¹⁵⁴ A *National Geographic* article by Elizabeth Rubin with photographs Lynsey Addario depicted Afghan women, with or without *burqas*, working in professional settings and organizing for political action.¹⁵⁵ However, it was much more common to see heart-breaking photos and human interest stories such as the *New York Times* article about an Afghan schoolgirl scarred by acid-throwing insurgents, or the ABC News segment and *Time* cover featuring a young wife whose nose had been cut off by her Taliban husband.¹⁵⁶

These war stories were defensible as realistic impressions of life under the shadow of war. They usually made no claim to truth greater than relating what one Afghan or group of Afghans had endured, and sympathetic media attention often produced outpourings of financial support for these victims.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² *Boston Globe*, “The Big Picture: Afghanistan, February 2010” (2010). *Boston Globe*, “The Big Picture: Afghanistan, July 2010” (2010).

¹⁵³ Dickinson (2010).

¹⁵⁴ Aroon (2010).

¹⁵⁵ E. Rubin and Addario (2010).

¹⁵⁶ Filkins, “Afghan Girls, Scarred by Acid, Defy Terror, Embracing School” (2009). Aro and Mooney (2010). Stengel (2010).

¹⁵⁷ For aid provided to Afghan victims after the *New York Times* and ABC stories, for example, see Filkins, “A School Bus for Shamsia” (2009), and Abawi, “Afghan woman whose nose, ears cut off travels to U.S.” (2010).

But similar images and stories, reproduced over and over again, had the effect of making Afghanistan's problems at once too large and too personal.

Presenting enough extreme cases of individual victimization fed the impression that Afghans as a whole were helpless to change their circumstances—which was much the same thing as saying that the strategic options for stabilizing Afghanistan were hopeless. Taken as a whole, images and stories of ordinary Afghans could be considered “poverty porn,” presenting visual and verbal clichés of victimization for no more productive purpose than the brief excitement of feelings of sympathy or disgust.¹⁵⁸

Moreover, liberal sentiments that oppressed or deprived Afghans *could not* improve their conditions increased conservative skepticism that deficiencies in the culture or character of Afghans meant that they *would not* improve their conditions. Pashtun villagers “don’t want to be encroached upon,” the former Marine and State Department employee Matthew Hoh told ABC News by way of explaining the futility of aid and governance efforts. “They’re very traditional, very poor, very rural people, and they don’t want outside involvement.”¹⁵⁹ Many US citizens raised on national narratives of self-reliance and distrust of intrusive government believed American assistance was promoting laziness and greed. “The Afghans are picking up bad habits,” a Marine sergeant serving in Helmand complained to West. “We give them something, and they act like we owe it to them.”¹⁶⁰ “We’re breeding an entitlement culture,” a Marine lieutenant colonel said of operations in Marja. “We’re doing all the work here.”¹⁶¹ His

¹⁵⁸ National Public Radio, “‘Poverty Porn’: Education Or Exploitation?” *Talk of the Nation* (2009).

¹⁵⁹ Wong (2010).

¹⁶⁰ West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 152.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

fellow commander in Garmsir district reported that the “passive attitude” of villagers “drives me crazy. The people have an inordinate fear of the Taliban; they won’t stand up for themselves.”¹⁶²

An Army officer in Kunar Province concluded that “an Afghan looks at democracy the way a drug addict looks at rehab. Both want the results but won’t go through the pain of getting there.”¹⁶³ In this view, the problem was not something that happened to Afghanistan—a disease that required a cure—but something Afghans had allowed to happen through a deplorable lack of willpower. This attitude was not unique to soldiers or former soldiers; it resonated with others who were able to judge Afghans from positions of relative wealth, status, or security. Most residents of Helmand “support the Taliban and the drug trade,” an interpreter from San Francisco told West. “They want things for nothing.”¹⁶⁴

Conclusions about weak-willed Afghans resurrected the stereotype of the treacherous Asian, leading soldiers, media, and other observers to discern general patterns of deception in tragic but numerically insignificant cases. By the time an Afghan border police officer killed six US soldiers in eastern Afghanistan in November 2010, there had been five such attacks in 13 months. During that period, more than 63,000 new recruits had been added to the Afghan army and police, and tens of thousands more were operating each day with Western forces.¹⁶⁵ Thus fewer than 7 in 100,000 Afghan troops had killed an allied soldier—a figure slightly lower than the murder rate among American

¹⁶² Ibid., 238.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 230.

¹⁶⁵ Partlow and Hamdard, “Officials: Afghan border police officer kills 6 U.S. troops, (2010).

military veterans, which in turn was well below the murder rate for the entire United States population when those two figures were compared in 2008.¹⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the facts did not prevent soldiers and reporters from suggesting that more betrayals were just around the corner. The Afghan police “are infiltrated by the Taliban at every level, from the very lowest to the very highest,” a retired British Army officer who had trained them declared in the *Telegraph* after five British soldiers were killed by an Afghan policeman in November 2009.¹⁶⁷ “Turncoat Afghan soldier kills 3 British troopers” ran the headline of *USA Today*’s version of a July 2010 Associated Press article in which every quoted source except a Taliban spokesman made the point that such attacks were rare.¹⁶⁸ On the day in April 2011 when the Pakistani prime minister visited Kabul to announce his support for a peace commission, a suicide bomber who had been recruited into the Afghan army killed 9 NATO and Afghan troops in Laghman Province. Both the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* devoted their headlines and ledes to the bombing.¹⁶⁹ Deadly deceit trumped dull diplomacy.

A quick return to the 2009 ambush at Ganjgal demonstrates how cases in which Afghan villainy was obvious or at least suspected became the basis for elite opinions about the prospects for US strategy. In a sworn statement about the incident, a scout squad leader who witnessed the attack mixes observation and speculation:

¹⁶⁶ Fox News, “New York Times Story About Murders by American War Veterans Questionable” (2008).

¹⁶⁷ Harding (2009).

¹⁶⁸ Associated Press, “Turncoat Afghan soldier kills 3 British troopers” (2010).

¹⁶⁹ Partlow and Hamdard, “Afghan soldier strikes inside military base; 8 NATO troops die in attacks” (2011). Hennessy-Fiske (2011).

The mission was definitely compromised. The elders/police could have easily tipped the enemy off. They knew what day we were coming. All I know is that they were already in position and waiting, and they had a ton of ammo.¹⁷⁰

At a greater remove from the attack, a Marine lieutenant used the occasion to make a broader generalization: “Whatever we do always leaks. You can’t trust even some of their soldiers or officers.”¹⁷¹ At a further remove, West argued that the “deceit” at Ganjgal “demonstrated the limits of rational dialogue and friendly persuasion.”¹⁷² “Five Americans and nine Afghans were killed on a sunny fall morning because of a betrayal caused by the opaque loyalties of the Afghan tribal society,” he concluded.¹⁷³ In this way, the bitter experiences of US troops were translated into enduring attitudes about the worthiness of the Afghan nation as both the object and inheritor of American COIN operations.

Suspicious about the dangers that Afghan soldiers and civilians posed on the battlefield extended to their ability to govern themselves. This perception posed a more difficult challenge to US strategy than occasional acts of treacherous violence because—under the comprehensive COIN paradigm discussed in the previous chapter—many elites had concluded that the Taliban’s true competitor was not pro-government forces but a highly credible, fully functioning Afghan state. “We’re the insurgents here,” as an Army captain explained to West, “and we’re selling a poor product called the Kabul government... The people believe Kabul’s the enemy.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Lamothe, “Heroism in ambush may yield top valor awards” (2010).

¹⁷¹ Landay, “We’re pinned down:’ 4 U.S. Marines die in Afghan ambush” (2009).

¹⁷² West, *The Wrong War* (2011), 110.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 218.

The barriers to good governance in Afghanistan were complex and enduring. “Pervasive, entrenched, and systemic corruption is now at an unprecedented scope,” a 2009 report by the US Agency for International Development concluded. “Thirty years of conflict that has weakened underdeveloped state institutions and the country’s social fabric, Afghanistan’s dominant role in worldwide opium and heroin production, and the tremendous size and diversity of international security, humanitarian and development assistance all increase Afghanistan’s vulnerability to corruption.”¹⁷⁵ This was a more or less accurate diagnosis, but not a very compelling one. Media elites anchored to the present tense of news could not talk much about the mixed legacy of social systems and history. They needed coherent stories in which distinct protagonists wrestled over pressing, clearly defined problems. Just as media frames gave greater weight to stories and images of soldiers in combat, therefore, views of Afghan governance sometimes suffered from stories that created a false sense of moral clarity or urgency.

Many stories about corruption drew from conventions of investigative reporting designed to expose the powerful hidden hand behind a criminal enterprise. In this vein, the *New York Times* published a series of articles on the Kandahar power broker Ahmed Wali Karzai—President Hamid Karzai’s brother—linking him to the Central Intelligence Agency’s payroll, the local drug trade, and assorted strong-arm tactics.¹⁷⁶ Likewise, a number of stories and a Senate investigation traced Taliban funding back to government contractors

¹⁷⁵ US Agency for International Development (2009).

¹⁷⁶ Filkins, Mazzetti, and Risen, “Brother of Afghan Leader Said to Be Paid by C.I.A.” (2009). Filkins, “Despite Doubt, Karzai Brother Retains Power” (2010).

providing security or logistics support to ISAF.¹⁷⁷ Corruption stories, like stories about rogue Afghan security forces, frequently drew their narrative power from the audience's sympathy for soldiers as victims readily betrayed by wily Afghans or faceless corporations out to make a fast buck.

By laying blame on individual actors or agencies with presumably malign motives, however, the conventions of investigative reporting often overlooked the perverse incentives motivating this bad behavior. For example, the infusion of more than \$50 billion in mostly unregulated financial aid since 2002—in an economy with mere \$27 billion annual Gross Domestic Product—overwhelmed Afghan institutions after a period in which international sanctions and neglect had made bribery a matter of economic survival for impoverished officials.¹⁷⁸ Graft also presented itself as a plausible means of *physical* survival, a corrosive but expedient way of binding distrustful factions together against a deadly enemy. “Kandahar is not just a Taliban problem; it is a mafia, criminal syndicate problem,” a senior defense official admitted to the *Washington Post*. “That is why it is so complicated. But clearly the most pressing threat is the Taliban.”¹⁷⁹

But the idea that corruption may have been an understandable product of Afghanistan's recent history or current security situation was beside the point. The damnable offense was that Afghans were not what they said they were. This was an unfair charge coming from American elites, though, because Afghans were not judged against ideals they had defined for themselves but rather those that were being defined continuously for them.

¹⁷⁷ Cole (2010). Rostom (2009). D. Wood (2009).

¹⁷⁸ Cordesman, “How America Corrupted Afghanistan: Time to Look in the Mirror” (2010), 5-8.

¹⁷⁹ Jaffe, “U.S. to temper stance on Afghan corruption” (2010).

A week after the first round of the 2009 presidential election, for instance, the *Washington Post* warned that “increasing accusations of fraud and voter coercion” might result in “an election viewed as illegitimate by many Afghans.”¹⁸⁰ Yet the fact that those accusations were made by each of the five leading candidates suggests that some Afghans who denounced the elections in the *Post* and elsewhere may have been concerned less with election fraud *per se* than with election fraud that failed to achieve the right outcome. Although most election coverage followed the usual pattern of Western observers faulting the Afghan government for being insufficiently liberal, the critique could be reversed to suggest that political principles got in the way of military effectiveness. When President Karzai sought support from local elders for planned operations in Kandahar in April 2010, he told skeptical leaders that “until the time you say you are happy, the operation will not happen.”¹⁸¹ The White House was “frustrated” by the “genuinely troubling” remarks, press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters, who continued for more than a month to parse whether the operation was stalled and whether Afghans should expect an “effective veto” of operations in their country or merely a commitment to “continual outreach.”¹⁸² Insisting that elections represent the will of the Afghan people was natural. Suggesting that the people’s will might enter into decisions about the use of military force, on the other hand, was slightly heretical.

In the end, questions about Afghanistan’s capacity for self-governance were not about the consequences of elections obviously marred by fraud or individuals clearly tainted by vice. Instead, questions centered on the

¹⁸⁰ Partlow and Constable, “Accusations Of Vote Fraud Multiply in Afghanistan” (2009).

¹⁸¹ Grey (2010).

¹⁸² Dougherty (2010). Spiegel and Dreazen (2010).

appropriateness of applying liberal values to a weak state and the authority of elites to make value judgments. Even commentators with a detailed knowledge of Afghanistan's long struggle with modernity suggested strategy should be guided by idealism. If "our people are going to be here fighting and dying... if the American public is going to be paying for this, we want the government that we're fighting for to be as efficient and as honest and as credible and legitimate as we can make it," Dexter Filkins declared on National Public Radio, by way of explaining the larger meaning of his story on Ahmed Wali Karzai's alleged links to the CIA.¹⁸³ But given that Western elites tended to evaluate Afghan state efficiency in terms of military security and state legitimacy in terms of liberal governance, expectations were bound to be frustrated one way or another.

Thus a March 2010 news analysis by the *New York Times* concluded that Karzai's modest electoral and anticorruption reforms did not go far enough because he had not "used his position as a bully pulpit to change the culture" of national politics, while at the same time noting that the Afghan president was seen to be "slipping away from the West" through his efforts to build relationships with Iran and China.¹⁸⁴ Later that year, the *Times* noted, Western diplomats were urging Karzai to go slow on his proposal to reduce and regulate the number of private security contractors in the country because of the risks posed to "important aid projects."¹⁸⁵ For Afghan leaders, any compromise on liberal values in the interest of stability or vice versa could be described as a failure at odds with US strategy.

¹⁸³ National Public Radio, "President Karzai's Brother on CIA's Payroll" (2009).

¹⁸⁴ A.J. Rubin and Cooper (2010).

¹⁸⁵ A. J. Rubin, "Karzai Delays Order to Ban Private Security Companies," 2010.

Afghan officials afraid of offending the liberal sensibilities of certain politicians, diplomats, rights advocates, and reporters could draw support from the view of others—including many defense and intelligence officials—that substantive government or social reforms were beyond the country's reach. "Virtually every significant Afghan figure has had brushes with the drug trade," a former CIA officer explained in reference to the necessity of working with local strongmen such as Ahmed Wali Karzai. "If you are looking for Mother Teresa, she doesn't live in Afghanistan."¹⁸⁶ This position rested on the stereotypical idea that Afghans were what they said they were—a poor tribal society in its third decade at war—and therefore incapable of reaching the liberal standards set by other nations. Corruption had been a part of Afghanistan "for however long this country has been in existence," Petraeus said in a December 2010 interview with ABC News. Western efforts were "not going to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland in a decade or less."¹⁸⁷ Indeed, US officials who had accepted the mission of changing Afghanistan routinely cited the backwardness of Afghans—individually and collectively—to justify their apparent lack of progress. In one of the embassy cables disclosed by Wikileaks, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry observed that Ahmed Wali Karzai "highlights one of our major challenges in Afghanistan: how to fight corruption and connect the people to their government, when the key government officials are themselves corrupt."¹⁸⁸ This framing of the problem represented an almost total rejection of the prospects for better governance, suggesting that US diplomats could only mend the Afghan state after the state had mended itself.

¹⁸⁶ Filkins, Mazzetti and Risen, "Brother of Afghan Leader Said to Be Paid by C.I.A." (2009).

¹⁸⁷ Agence France-Presse, "Petraeus defends Karzai on corruption questions" (2010).

¹⁸⁸ Shane, Mazzetti and Filkins, "Cables Depict Afghan Graft, Starting at Top" (2010).

In this way, elite discourse squeezed Afghans between high standards of performance and low assumptions about their ability to perform either on the battlefield or within the halls of power. When Afghans went off script by condemning night raids, seeking control of mercenaries, resisting electoral interventions, or pursuing foreign relations with illiberal regimes, the effects were evaluated mostly in terms of the government's distance from its Western allies rather than its progress toward a measure of independence. Considering the position of Afghan officials—considered puppets by their people and necessary evils by their closest allies—it was not surprising that they wound up following their own interests and vacillating between defiance and appeasement of competing elite and public expectations. What was a bit more surprising—and discouraging—was that the predictability of Afghan behavior did little to prevent critics from seizing on each misstep as further evidence of the Afghan people's inherent unworthiness in comparison to Western societies with equally hapless records in the region.

War Stories, Equity, and Accountability: Policy, Personalities, Press, or Process?

Through discourse that presented conflicting identities of US soldiers and Afghans, elites divided over basic questions about the motives and effects of the agents responsible for implementing the American strategy. In this regard, discourse emerging from the tactical level did not differ significantly from discussions at the strategic or operational level. In 2009, elites inside and outside the Obama administration could not agree on the appropriateness or

possible consequences of an escalation, a withdrawal, or other less developed alternatives. They also could not agree on the appropriateness or consequence of applying a counterinsurgency doctrine which provided the most readily available foundation for translating the strategy's aspirations into action. Unanswered questions about proper strategy and doctrine ensured there would be little consensus over whether soldiers and Afghans were doing the right kind of things day to day, much less whether they were doing them well.

The inequities of elite conversations contributed to this mess of meaning. Media preferences and a long history of policy choices that had favored military institutions with a disproportionate share of manpower and resources had the effect of excluding the voices of civilian actors who were considered less interesting or relevant to US strategy. Working from within a strong narrative tradition that portrayed American soldiers as unimpeachable heroes or victims, officials lacked some measure of autonomy when discussing the limited utility of military force, the need for restraint in combat, or the regular necessity of putting soldier's lives at risk for distant and vaguely defined objectives. Those arguments were advanced only at the peril of public outrage and elite backlash, even when those arguing the position were military commanders like McChrystal. Operational secrecy and a desire to shield soldiers and politicians from public condemnation prevented a free flow of information about the consequences of night raids and other controversial military actions, deepening elite skepticism.

While US soldiers were over-represented in elite discourse, Afghans were under-represented. Differences in language and culture meant that most Afghans lacked the freedom to present their perspectives directly to Western

audiences. Instead, the Afghan point of view often had to pass through one or more interpretive filters. The unequal power relationship between the United States and Afghanistan fed assumptions that the decisions Americans made in Washington, the US embassy, or military headquarters were more important than the decisions made at the national, provincial, or local level by Afghan officials. The collective history of most Western elites included both illiberal assumptions about the inferiority of Asian races and liberal expectations about the behavior of government officials, security forces, and business leaders. Therefore Afghanistan's real struggles with providing effective security, governance, and economic development were compounded by elite critics within the United States and other allied countries who were predisposed to set high standards and anticipate failures.

The historical and cultural sources of discourse that distorted war stories were pervasive and diffuse. Efforts to improve the equity of discussions about daily developments in Afghanistan required a more specific conception of who or what was accountable for determining the general direction and content of the war debate. Narratives of victimhood that established the relative powerlessness of soldiers or Afghans made it difficult for US elites to assign responsibility to them as a class, although unchallenged racial assumptions made this less problematic in the case of Afghans when elites were looking for someone to blame.

A safer approach was to link elites' focus on violence by soldiers or the shortcomings of Afghans to a misguided policy that associated itself too closely with either group. After the sudden death of Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's senior representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, his widow

and colleagues argued that he had quietly supported “a vision of painstaking diplomacy toward a strategic goal—peace.”¹⁸⁹ Reconciliation “was what he was working toward in Afghanistan, and building up the civilian and political side that had been swamped by the military,” his widow said. “The whole policy was off-kilter, way too militarized. Richard never thought that this war could be won on the battlefield.”¹⁹⁰ The policy, in Holbrooke’s posthumously revealed opinion, also failed by backing a lame Afghan horse. “A stable Afghanistan is not essential,” Holbrooke wrote in private notes provided to the *New York Times*; “a stable Pakistan is essential.”¹⁹¹

These and similar musings underscored the ways that elite discourse about the administration’s policy choices had marginalized nonmilitary options and the regional nature of the security threat, effectively excluding major players such as Holbrooke from playing a more central role in the strategic conversation. But such exclusions were not entirely arbitrary. Policy solidified around military operations in Afghanistan not because politicians preferred generals to diplomats or confronting Afghanistan to confronting Pakistan. If anything, the Obama administration appeared eager to resist those biases.¹⁹² On the contrary, advocates of an alternative, Holbrookian strategy did not do enough to address the hard realities that argued against diplomacy, development, and a stronger focus on Pakistan.

Nine years after the 9/11 attacks, the deputy secretary of state for management and resources admitted that mobilizing as few as 1,000 civilians to support reconciliation and aid programs in Afghanistan “is harder than it

¹⁸⁹ Kristof (2010).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² See previous two chapters.

should be because we don't have the depth of resources, human resources and experiences that we hopefully five years from now ... will have.”¹⁹³ Personal brilliance did not appear to be an effective substitute for institutional neglect, ineptitude, or sluggishness. Holbrooke invested three months and 20 days in his signature achievement, the 1995 Dayton peace accords that ended the civil war in Bosnia. With two years on the job, the master diplomat failed to produce any comparable breakthrough in Afghanistan or Pakistan.¹⁹⁴ The value of more economic development was uncertain. Aid groups estimated as much as 40 percent of development funds were wasted, although there was no consensus on exactly how much aid money was being squandered through fraud, corruption, or misuse.¹⁹⁵ Nor were there clear benefits in Holbrooke's preference for throwing more visible weight against the Pakistani problem, since those efforts took place under the shrouds of military secrecy, diplomatic privilege, and the Pakistani government's prevarications and denials in the face of a popular tide of anti-Americanism.¹⁹⁶ It is difficult to appreciate or support what cannot be openly discussed.

If explaining war stories as the outcome of a militarized policy made accountability for public discourse an exercise in counterfactual speculation, a more concrete option was to affix responsibility to the attention given to the outsized personalities who represented soldiers and Afghans—primarily McChrystal and Karzai. In Washington, administration officials worried that

¹⁹³ Quoted in Wong (2010).

¹⁹⁴ Chandrasekaran, “Richard Holbrooke dies: Veteran U.S. diplomat brokered Dayton peace accords” (2010).

¹⁹⁵ Cordesman, “How America Corrupted Afghanistan: Time to Look in the Mirror” (2010), 6.

¹⁹⁶ Mazzetti and Sanger, “Obama Expands Missile Strikes Inside Pakistan” (2009). Ryan (2011).

complimentary profiles of McChrystal in the late summer and fall of 2009 could hijack the strategy review by giving too much credence to his leaked recommendations.¹⁹⁷ Only a few months later, the administration forced the general's retirement after a *Rolling Stone* caricature of him and his staff as embodiments of military arrogance—mocking their civilian superiors while pushing a strategy that “rebrands the military, expanding its authority (and its funding) to encompass the diplomatic and political sides of warfare.”¹⁹⁸ In Kabul, anonymous sources fed reports that Karzai “saw plots in every corner” and that his “family has opium and blood on their hands.”¹⁹⁹ In private correspondence that was soon disclosed to the world, Eikenberry, the Afghan president's erstwhile ally in Kabul, accused him of an “inability to grasp the most rudimentary principles of state-building” and “deep seated insecurity as a leader.”²⁰⁰

Some of this criticism was deserved. The comments made by McChrystal's staff displayed a startling lack of discretion and maturity in the presence of a reporter. In his push to limit civilian casualties and lift up the struggling Afghan government, the senior American military commander sometimes appeared tone deaf to the rhetorical traditions of a wartime nation, which required a gentle patriotic chauvinism and extravagant deference to the safety and judgment of troops the field. Leading journalists who had spent time with McChrystal attributed his downfall to an impolitic personality that was “deeply concerned with ... the duty of soldiers to be honest with their civilian

¹⁹⁷ See Chapter 3.

¹⁹⁸ Hastings (2010).

¹⁹⁹ E. Rubin, “Karzai in His Labyrinth” (2009).

²⁰⁰ Cooper and Gall, “Cables Offer Shifting Portrait of Karzai” (2010).

masters” and “incapable of fudging the truth.”²⁰¹ But—based on the criticism he attracted during the strategy review and implementation of his tactical directives—he also seemed somewhat oblivious to the ways in which his military advice about the necessity of COIN operations made him vulnerable to the exact opposite charge. Opponents could perceive McChrystal as disloyal or dishonest simply because his military advice posed a threat to their identities or agendas.

Karzai, for his part, was an erratic ally. He could be gracious and supportive—an “absolutely straightforward” and “reliable” partner, in McChrystal’s estimation.²⁰² At other times, he could be defensive and defiant, as when he reportedly threatened to join the Taliban after accusing foreigners of meddling in the elections his own supporters had fixed.²⁰³ On other occasions, he could be evasive and autocratic, making controversial decisions about issues that mattered to his critics—such as electoral reform or anti-corruption prosecutions—with little consultation inside or outside Afghanistan, countering the predictable domestic and international clamor with unconvincing public justifications.²⁰⁴

To his credit, President Obama largely resisted the temptation to add to the *ad hominem* attacks on McChrystal and Karzai. Although Obama ousted McChrystal to defend the principle of civilian control of the military, the White House’s position softened with time and, possibly, reflection on the comparable

²⁰¹ Thomas, “A General Who Speaks His Mind (Even When He Shouldn’t)” (2010). Klein (2010).

²⁰² Partlow, “Tensions between Eikenberry, McChrystal will be focus of their Washington visit” (2010).

²⁰³ Associated Press, “Karzai Threatened to Join Taliban, Sources Say” (2010).

²⁰⁴ See, for example, Oppel and Shah, “Lawmakers Resist Karzai’s Move on Election Panel” (2010); Nordland and Filkins, “Antigraft Units, Backed by U.S., Draw Karzai’s Ire” (2010).

disrespectful behavior of McChrystal's military and civilian superiors during the 2009 strategy review—which was revealed through the administration's own willing cooperation with a prominent reporter, Bob Woodward.²⁰⁵ Less than a year after resigning, McChrystal was back working for the White House as part of an advisory board for First Lady Michelle Obama's Joining Forces initiative for military families.²⁰⁶ Obama invited Karzai to Washington in May 2010 after officials concluded that the “tough love” approach to the Afghan president “had only made him resentful.”²⁰⁷ Although Obama's aides continued to rebuke Karzai's more intemperate decisions and public outbursts, the overall approach of the White House staff was that “a unified message of support for the prideful Afghan president was essential to the relationship.”²⁰⁸

Perhaps Obama had sympathy for imperfect leaders who paid a steep political price for their willingness to stand in the middle of Afghanistan's intractable problems. Or perhaps the president—as a student of history, politics, and law—recognized that it was a mistake to assume that even powerful actors could exercise complete control over policy situations, or to assume their failures were the products of incompetence or malign intent rather than accident, coincidence, or necessity.²⁰⁹ Throughout its history, the United States had scored military and foreign policy successes with generals who were more stubborn and less competent than McChrystal, along with questionable allies from Louis XVI to Stalin who made Karzai appear beloved and saintly by comparison.

²⁰⁵ Shear, “White House Infighting: The McChrystal Factor” (2010).

²⁰⁶ Shanker, “McChrystal to Lead Program for Military Families” (2011).

²⁰⁷ Landler, “Karzai Visits Washington, With Smiles All Around” (2010).

²⁰⁸ S. Wilson, “Obama meets with Afghan President Hamid Karzai at the White House” (2010).

²⁰⁹ Jervis (1976), 349-354.

Media narratives presenting McChrystal and Karzai as polarizing personalities suggested a third possibility for establishing accountability for trends in elite discourse. Since the majority of war stories were conveyed in the books, articles, photos, videos, and blogs produced by professional journalists or expert opinion hawkers, maybe it was the press—rather than the mixed messages conveyed by US policy or individual leaders—that was most responsible for the day-to-day status of the debate. In attempting to render Afghanistan through the elements of good storytelling, it was possible that media had created an irreconcilable conflict about whether or not success in Afghanistan was possible through military violence or indigenous leadership.

Media elites clearly informed the thinking of others and therefore shared responsibility for the substance of public debates. Stories about soldiers and Afghans as victims or villains did not spring organically from the varied physical and moral landscape of the country but from conscious decisions by editors and reporters to make sense of complexity by sticking to the conventions of combat journalism, poverty porn, and investigative reporting on military atrocities and Third World kleptocrats. Much reporting was done through the war tourism of commentators who divided their attention among many topics and spent little time in Afghanistan and little of that time outside Kabul or the larger military bases. The journalistic habit of describing pending strategic and operational decisions as a contest with winners and losers—if McChrystal is allowed to implement his tactical guidance, soldiers suffer; if Karzai's brother stays in power in Kandahar, US anti-corruption efforts fail—equated compromise with political weakness and therefore made cooperation on those issues less likely. "I think public discourse on Afghanistan ... is shallow,

polarized, and used primarily for political gain,” a reporter for a leading American media outlet confessed. “I wish I had a solution for changing that. I am guessing that my own coverage is part of that failure.”²¹⁰

While media certainly had a part in distorting and diverting elite discourse in unhelpful ways, their coverage also reflected realities and perspectives from outside the newsroom. The press chose its topics and forms, but the substance of its reports—observations, explanations, opinions, facts, and statistics—came from a wider world. Parsing coverage of the war, it was difficult to determine if soldiers talked about their work in certain ways—their dedication to violence, their frustration with dragging Afghan villages out of medieval squalor, their struggles against clueless superiors—because this was their direct experience or because this was the experience media had taught them to expect and express. Did a majority of Afghans experience daily violence and corruption that was beyond the cultural pale, or were the minority who found their way to Western reporters lashing out at authority in a language of victimhood that seemed to motivate action or simply make them feel better? Were journalists drawing conclusions from collected information or collecting information from predrawn conclusions? Would their conclusions change if government and military elites were less secretive, and how much secrecy was in place because of observed media opinions and behaviors? Given the way that news and its subjects were intertwined, it was impossible to separate cause and effect.

In addition to their complex relationship with sources, reporters also lived within a broader national culture that constrained their freedom to

²¹⁰ Email exchange with the author, 4 October 2010. The correspondent’s name has been withheld by request.

structure war stories in their own way. American news organizations covering events in Afghanistan competed for financial survival in a more fragmented and integrated market that connected enough people with specific interests to sustain a large number of information communities engaged in endless discourse on a very narrow range of topics.²¹¹ Media elites felt that the audience—or at least their conception of the audience—told them what was important, not the other way around, as one television correspondent explained:

As a journalist living in Afghanistan, too much of the US public and media focus is on the DC side of the Afghan story. The Obama/McChrystal relationship, the Obama/Karzai relationship, the Holbrooke is a jerk and can't work with people stories get way too much focus in the US. However, that is the media environment we live in. US citizens don't want news about people they don't know, don't care about, and can't pronounce their names.²¹²

Whether or not this view of economic viability underestimated the intelligence of news consumers, the degree to which media's war stories satisfied penchants for violence and disparaging views of foreigners had strong historical roots in the nation's culture. As Richard Slotkin observes in the first of his three volumes on American mythology, the "Indian war was a uniquely American experience" which produced "the solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods, that became the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero of the early republic."²¹³ Exactly 170 years separate the last edition of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and West's *The Wrong War*.

²¹¹ Rosenau (1998).

²¹² Email exchange with the author, 16 October 2010. The correspondent requested anonymity.

²¹³ Slotkin (1973).

But Cooper's fictional Natty Bumppo—the white man raised as a savage, using his peerless skill as a hunter to defend the innocent and his brothers in arms, skeptical of efforts to tame the wilderness, betrayed by stuffy officers and crafty natives alike—is as recognizable as a veteran of the Korengal as he is as a veteran of the French and Indian War. The war stories American media told in the first two years of the Obama administration were not much different from the war stories Americans had been telling each other since the country's founding.

War stories therefore emerged from specific choices made by American policy makers, the most powerful personalities in Afghanistan, and the press that covered the conflict, but none of these factors by itself was decisive. Each of these elements interacted with the others while positioning themselves within the abstract and interpretable contexts of history and culture. But does recognizing these complex interactions result in anything more than a smug satisfaction in intellectual subtlety? How does strategy account for varying interpretations of itself?

What linked the particular perspectives that policy, personalities, and the press brought to war stories was a process centered on reconciling elite opinion with conflicting values, interests, and effects. The common approach was to interpret ambiguous events through the denial of equity: elites asserted one version of the truth in an effort to convince the undecided and silence the unconvinced. Narratives about the victimhood of soldiers, for example, were sustained by operational secrecy that obscured evidence of possibly negligent or criminal acts and by an insistence on the authority of the combat veteran's point of view before all others. Narratives about the villainy of Afghans judged

their behavior against liberal standards veiled in a shallow respect for an enduring tribal culture, which implied Afghans could never be more like their Western allies. When Afghans suggested—as Karzai did on several occasions—that modern Afghanistan was the mess the West had made of it, these complaints were dismissed as the “blame America” tactics of political infants who had grown complacent after a decade of suckling on international aid.²¹⁴

“In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen,” the Vietnam veteran and author Tim O’Brien has said. If “there’s any moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning.”²¹⁵ Although O’Brien’s fiction is concerned with the human experience of war, the strategic inference of his reflections is the difficulty of achieving consensus on legitimacy—either the consequences of the strategy’s plot as it unfolds, or the moral of the story. To tell truer war stories, elites need to focus less on the meanings that stories about legitimacy are supposed to provide and focus more on the process of true storytelling, which is the process of critical discourse. It is not too late to shift the focus of discussions about war from product to process. A true war story “never seems to end,” O’Brien writes. “Not then, not ever.”²¹⁶ As the stories about Afghanistan continue to shape America’s involvement there and anywhere else the nation might venture in the years ahead, it is important to have our stories straight.

²¹⁴ Cooper and Gall, “Cables Offer Shifting Portrait of Karzai” (2010).

²¹⁵ O’Brien (1990), 78 and 84.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

CHAPTER 6

ACHIEVING CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN AMERICAN STRATEGY

It has been a running theme in my political career—the notion that there’s something about our democracy that is broken that prevents us from solving real problems. I think throughout my career I have tried to describe that, about what in our broken political process needs to be fixed. Divisions based more on ideological or racial or religious constructs than they’re based on deeply rooted beliefs—that’s part of the change I’ve talked about. The dominance of special interests and money in politics—that’s part of the change I’ve talked about. The lack of participation and involvement in decision making—that’s part of the change I’ve talked about. The need to cut through the spin and PR and to be able to present things honestly to the American people—that’s part of the change I’ve talked about.

— Senator Barack H. Obama
on the presidential campaign trail, January 2008¹

The souring of the 2003 invasion of Iraq provided ample opportunity to denounce the militaristic and imperial leanings that are the darker side of American exceptionalism. Although these condemnations came from different quarters, they shared a common belief in an easy consensus on the utility of force. Carrying the world’s biggest military hammer, the argument went, American leaders of all political stripes were out looking for nails. Dissent from news media, marginalized elites, or the general public was stifled, either because the fear of terrorism allowed belligerent leaders to seize the nation’s

¹ Quoted in Wolffe (2010), 26.

agenda or because the most powerful Americans shared enduring illusions about the value of an aggressive foreign policy. When President Barack Obama decided to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan to more than 100,000 in 2009, his decision was viewed by some critics as one more step down the American empire's disastrous path to perpetual war.²

Still, the costs of the war in Iraq and America's renewed effort in Afghanistan—tens of thousands of lives, hundreds of billions of dollars, severe damage to America's international reputation—arguably have ushered in a period of more pragmatic reflection. If American officials have not lost their appetite for war, then they at least are beginning to count their calories. This approach is exemplified by the Obama administration's response to the tumultuous social revolts in the Middle East and North Africa in the first half of 2011, as described by Ryan Lizza in the *New Yorker*:

Obama has emphasized bureaucratic efficiency over ideology, and approached foreign policy as if it were case law, deciding his response to every threat or crisis on its own merits. "When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you're going to get yourself into trouble," he said in a recent interview with NBC News.³

Lizza says that "Obama's reluctance to articulate a grand synthesis has alienated both realists and idealists," which suggests the root cause of elite frustration is the president's failure to commit to a strategy guided by clearly articulated interests or values.⁴ Yet what single strategy for dealing with the Arab Spring, based on any possible combination of interests or values, would fail to alienate a significant portion of these critics, regardless of its moral or

² See the discussion on critique of American militarism in Chapter 3.

³ Lizza (2011), 55.

⁴ Ibid.

practical clarity? Obama may lack valid strategies for dealing with emerging events, but that judgment rests on the often mistaken assumption that questions of strategic validity can be resolved in a matter of weeks or months. When such resolution requires the personal investment of a diverse group of domestic and international elites with the ability to affect outcomes, quick and easy consensus on strategy will be the exception rather than the rule—a fact demonstrated two years before the revolts as the administration struggled to define its approach to Afghanistan.

The general pattern of elite discourse about US strategy in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 was to try to force consensus on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the plan by focusing primarily on one dimension of its validity: the appropriateness of ends, the consequence of means, or the authority of decision makers. The unstated intent of this approach was to simplify the process of making or criticizing strategy in the interest of arriving at a definitive position that then could be propagated among other elites. By streamlining the process, however, the resulting product was deficient in the areas that seemed to matter most to the unconverted. The administration therefore could not boost its own confidence or expand elite ownership of its plan. But at the same time, critics produced no substantive changes in the strategy because they failed to address the administration's concerns, which primarily were about the consequences of going too far in any direction. Strategy as an adaptive process stalled while elites talked past each other.

At the strategic level, Obama entered office with a campaign promise to reinvigorate the nation's flagging efforts in Afghanistan, but the costs of an implied escalation collided with the president's economic priorities, his sense of

responsibility to US troops, and his desire to repair hostile international images of America that had worsened under his predecessor. The essential question, then, was one of appropriateness: was continued intervention in Afghanistan worth the cost? Although Obama's team made fitful starts at addressing its competing priorities, officials wound up glossing over them by attempting to balance contradictory ends with mixed means—an escalation of troops that signaled resolve along with a cap on troop numbers and a timeline for withdrawal that signaled the limits of that resolve in the context of larger national interests.

Elites outside the administration tended to ignore Obama's focus on consequences by raising issues of authority and appropriateness. News media portrayed the strategy review as a contest of authority between the Pentagon and the White House. This narrative invested the political reputations of senior officials in the outcome of the review, which had the effect of intensifying internal divisions and making it less likely that the process would generate a strategy that clearly favored one particular guiding philosophy—such as whether to escalate or withdraw, counter al Qaeda terrorists or Taliban insurgents, or focus on Afghanistan or Pakistan. Meanwhile, progressive and conservative critics attacked the war's appropriateness, insisting that the review had dodged discussions about whether Afghanistan could be stabilized and whether adding American military forces to the region was the best way to do that. These criticisms were valid but usually lacked practical recommendations for extricating the United States from its ongoing commitment to regional security.

At the operational level, the administration's strategy was translated into action through the principles of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine which, although Obama had avoided describing his strategy in those terms, represented the closest available approximation of the military, diplomatic, and economic means the administration intended to apply to improve conditions in Afghanistan. The validity of COIN doctrine was based on the authority it derived from prior conflicts, especially the Iraq surge led by General David Petraeus. Presented as an *unconventional* approach to war, COIN defined itself as an act of dissent by figures at the margins of the policy establishment, fighting their way toward acceptance against leaders who were reluctant to give up dreams of fast and efficient warfare. COIN might not work in Afghanistan the way it had elsewhere, its advocates admitted, but the surest way to ensure its failure was to question its historic authority by repeating the debate about the doctrine's basic applicability. Success required resolve, and resolve required faith in the authority of the strategy, manifested by patient endurance of initial setbacks until things got better—if they got better.

The soldiers and civilians charged with implementing the strategy divided over unanswered questions about COIN's ends and means. Some elites argued that US efforts should fulfill liberal aspirations for the expansion of democracy, free markets, and human rights. Others said the results must conform with local culture and history, setting expectations that fell short of Western liberal standards but were good enough for Afghanistan. Some sought to apply expansive solutions that addressed the root causes of instability with governance and development programs that Afghans could sustain indefinitely. Others sought short-term gains in security through rapid infusions of aid that

demonstrated the immediate benefits of supporting the Afghan government and its Western allies. Although assertions of COIN's authority succeeded in positioning the doctrine as the default approach to stabilizing Afghanistan, it left the precise meaning and application of the doctrine open to quite different interpretations.

At the tactical level, first-person accounts of the war helped to establish soldiers and Afghans as the most authentic and therefore authoritative voices on the current state of the strategy. The need for compelling stories put extreme cases of violence and suffering at the forefront of news coverage, which reinforced the notion that Afghanistan was an Oriental puzzle-box too cunning and mysterious for simple, impatient, cash-strapped Westerners to solve. Individual war stories, enhanced by the journalistic conventions of combat and investigative reporting, also advanced two conflicting narratives about people at the center of the strategy. The first considered war as something like a natural disaster that happened *to* people; the second treated war as a type of original sin committed *by* people.

Just as COIN doctrine was assumed to be authoritative but interpreted in different ways, common assumptions about the authenticity of people with direct experience of the war's effects led to different recommendations for preventing or softening strategic failure. If soldiers and Afghans were seen as victims, then the best remedies would free these people from whatever was harming them: restraints on self-defense if one cared about soldiers, indiscriminate violence if one cared about Afghans, or prolonged conflict if one cared about both. On the other hand, if soldiers and Afghans tended to be villains, then strategy needed to limit freedom by holding people accountable for

excessive violence or corruption. Given these diverging views, it is no wonder that there was no agreement on whether bad strategy was ruining good people or bad people were ruining good strategy in Afghanistan.

Interpreting Elite Dissent as Strategic Failure

Although public discourse about the validity of the strategy review, COIN doctrine, and the experiences of soldiers and Afghans revealed intriguing patterns of communication among elites, the divisions enabled by this discourse only mattered if they were problematic and preventable. To judge from their public comments, senior officials do not always feel it is necessary or possible to promote the legitimacy of US strategy and enlist more elites in their cause. Instead, opposition to a plan often is worn as a badge of honor, with dissent offered as proof that only the strategy's authors have the wisdom and courage to make tough choices.

In one of the more striking examples of the cold comfort that US policy makers take in being despised, Henry Kissinger dismissed efforts to deal with the opponents of the Vietnam War, who “did not permit any discussion of the practicalities of extrication, and treated attempts to do so as symptomatic of the [Nixon] Administration’s surreptitious desire to continue the war.”⁵ Several scholars support Nixon and Kissinger’s assessment of the strategic situation and their resistance to public pressure, although such praise is qualified by an acknowledgement of the damage done by the administration’s heavy-handed

⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 688.

tactics.⁶ Looking back at the Iraq war in light of collapsing autocracies in the Middle East, commentators such as the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and the military historian Victor Davis Hanson have given President George W. Bush credit for the unpopular but necessary step of deposing Saddam Hussein.⁷ Even as he defined himself in opposition to Bush, President Obama contrasted his weighty decision on Afghanistan against “the same rancor and cynicism that has in recent times poisoned our national discourse.”⁸

Regardless of how principled, practical, or polite wartime officials may be when compared to their critics, however, strategy needs to be concerned with elite dissent. Despite the expanded powers of the presidency, weak congressional oversight, and public apathy, no chief executive who has followed Nixon into an age of global communication can expect to avoid some form of scrutiny and backlash against military operations that lack sufficient political consensus. Although he enjoyed tremendous freedom to plan and direct the slow extraction the United States from Vietnam, Nixon’s secretive expansion of the war helped to fuel the political rancor of the Watergate investigations and to promote passage of the 1973 War Powers Act. Almost three decades later, Obama’s political opponents in the House of Representatives proved equally willing to rebuke him with that statute when he failed to seek congressional approval for America’s extended involvement in NATO military operations in Libya.⁹

⁶ For example, Rose (2010), Chapter 6, and Randolph (2007).

⁷ Brooks (2011). V. D. Hanson (2011).

⁸ Obama, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (December 2009).

⁹ Steinhauer (2011).

The consequences of dissent are not only political, however. Dissent can prevent a strategy from being implemented when it is opposed not by reflexively hostile political opponents but by the principal agents of the strategy. Kissinger could disparage the idealism of vocal antiwar activists in the belief that many right-thinking people inside or outside government supported the benefits of peace with honor. The Obama administration, on the other hand, faced its most meaningful dissent on the Afghanistan strategy from military personnel, civilian officials, and their Afghan allies.

The persistence of Vietnam analogies in elite discourse about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is itself a testament to the importance of addressing validity in a comprehensive way. Nations that do not reflect on why, how, or under whose authority they make war and peace can endure decades of political and institutional upheaval when things go badly. Yet the difficulty of reaching consensus on questions of validity does not mean that the wars the United States may fight in the years ahead are harmful to American society. Arguments about the validity of military interventions are signs of the *importance* of the topic to a diverse group of elites, rather than proof that military intervention as a category of state action lacks legitimacy. The basic problem with elite discourse about war, therefore, is not that it provokes arguments but that the arguments proceed in ways that keep elites divided. From the perspective of public discourse, the problem with America's recent military operations is less a lack of validity than a lack of equity.

The relationship between validity and equity in discourse can be likened to the relationship between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* claims in just war theory. While the acceptable reasons for choosing to wage war may remain in

dispute well beyond the end of the conflict, it is more difficult to argue the justice of the cause if the available means of attaining it are blatantly immoral.¹⁰ Likewise, it becomes more difficult to prevent flawed or irreconcilable conclusions about the validity of military action if discussions about that action are not free and open.

By 2009, the US strategy in Afghanistan might have resuscitated its wheezing legitimacy through one of two approaches. The first—the one to which civilian and military officials pinned their hopes—was proving validity by real immediate success. Unfortunately, the strategy failed to produce many promising empirical results on a political timeline that had been accelerated by the frustrations of the major international players. A second approach to legitimacy—hinted at in gestures toward greater openness but never explicitly stated or cogently developed—was to keep the clock on anticipated results ticking by arguing from a position of generous equity. To sustain elites' faith in the possibility of worthwhile strategic outcomes, there had to be faith in the processes through which those outcomes would be identified, explained, and negotiated.

Unlike validity—which depended on personal values that were difficult to influence and results that were difficult to achieve— a small number of US government and media elites had the ability to change the equity of discourse about Afghanistan. They chose who participated in conversations about the strategy. They determined how stringently rules controlling the flow of information were interpreted and enforced. They set standards for acceptable dissent and used the power of their positions to restrain or reject the comments

¹⁰ Walzer (2006), 127-137.

of less powerful subordinates, allies, or opponents. Sadly, those with the greatest ability to extend equity to other elites more often withheld it—guided by the desire to affirm the legitimacy of their views but instead weakening them through stunted public discourse.

During the 2009 strategy review, the Obama administration insisted on conducting its discussions within a small circle of senior officials. The guiding principle of the sessions, as the president later phrased it, was to “welcome debate” but not “tolerate division”—that is, to discuss strategic alternatives on their merits while avoiding a slide into personal or political bickering that would complicate unified support for the final product.¹¹ The primary means of implementing this approach was devil’s advocacy against the military establishment. Vice President Joseph Biden, members of the National Security Council, and to a lesser degree the president himself all probed for weaknesses in the Pentagon’s proposed strategy while attempting to satisfy their concerns by accumulating more and more details about the risks and uncertainties associated with the plan. The apparent objective of the review was to examine the strategy’s validity by subjecting it to a lengthy assessment, which had the added benefit of casting the president’s eventual decision as the result of a thorough and serious process of deliberation.

The internalization of the strategy review backfired in meaningful ways. It failed to establish the *bona fides* of the eventual strategy because it failed to evaluate the counterinsurgency option presented by military planners against other possible plans on equal terms. Instead, the review devoted itself to detailing the potential problems with minor variations on the theme of

¹¹ Obama, “Statement by the President in the Rose Garden” (June 2010).

escalation, which reinforced civilian suspicions inside and outside the administration that the military was driving policy. At the same time, pitting half the administration against the other in a game of devil's advocacy left little room for either innovation or consensus. The few senior officials who were not compiling arguments in support of a comprehensive COIN campaign seemed to envision their responsibility as attacking that idea—directly in private meetings, or anonymously in the press—rather than providing good alternatives. News media, already prone to treat the review as a contest of wills, invested the outcome with political consequences for participants who then could not back a proposal that did not reflect their influence. Seeking to engage Afghanistan's problems with a bold plan untainted by divisive politics, Obama's team skirted the most difficult issues about the purpose of their strategy as officials tried to save face on more superficial details that had become freighted with political significance.

As the makeshift strategy emerged from Washington into the wider world, problems with the exclusivity of discourse were compounded by restrictions on autonomy and transparency. COIN doctrine derived from historical narratives and expert opinion that shared assumptions about the threats posed by failed states and the necessity of lengthy military policing as a basis for social transformation. Government officials and scholars who did not subscribe to these interpretations of world events found themselves on the margins of defense policy, characterized as throwbacks to a time before 9/11 when national security elites could dream of peace interrupted by conflicts settled quickly and painlessly by deft diplomacy or surgical strikes. The presumptive authority of the comprehensive approach to COIN codified in US

military doctrine prevented many elites who made their living within the defense community from advancing alternative theories of victory.

Nevertheless, COIN's track record was uneven, and even the doctrine's strongest advocates could not guarantee success. Instead, supporters advised patience, which was the resource in shortest supply as Afghanistan became the longest war in American history. Elites sought signs of early progress, but these indicators—where they existed—were hidden from view. Regarded as a whole-of-government strategy for improving social stability, COIN implied so many interrelated improvements to Afghanistan's security, governance, and economy that measurements of progress were complicated beyond the limits of comprehension.

At a more simplistic level, COIN was intended to isolate insurgents from the Afghan people where they could be killed, captured, or convinced. But elites outside the government received little verifiable information about the progress made when insurgents were raided, imprisoned, or brought to the negotiating table—an official silence that persisted even when reports about these efforts appeared to contradict US strategy. Charitably, this dedication to secrecy could be interpreted as a willingness to accept public condemnation in order to give soldiers and statesmen the privacy and freedom of action they needed to remain effective. Since the need for secrecy was more often assumed than explained, however, the lack of transparency also could be read as a means of protecting government agents from the criticism that would follow the disclosure of illegal, immoral, or merely incompetent action.

Top-down efforts to restrict who was qualified to discuss US strategy and what they were permitted to discuss were countered by war stories that

attempted to convey the situation in Afghanistan from the bottom up. Although these stories often challenged the official narrative about the effectiveness of COIN, they introduced their own distortions by presenting individuals as stereotypical victims or villains. Because news media were drawn to stories of violence, suffering, corruption, and political intrigue, many journalists skewed their reporting toward brutal experiences and polarizing personalities that fit easily into traditional storylines but otherwise did not represent the daily reality of many US troops and Afghans. Reporters or editors were not solely to blame for the problems with their stories, though. Soldiers and Afghans often traded on their identity as victims to argue against policies that they could represent as hurting them. They were also wary of being presented as villains and therefore obscured information about their more questionable activities, which only increased suspicions about possible misconduct.

In short, elite consensus on US strategy in Afghanistan faltered because the ends and means were hard to define and justify. Since there are no easy decisions in a war of choice, that challenge was predictable. What was more surprising was that the preferred methods of elite communication tended to make a bad situation worse. Contrary to fears about the manipulative influence of propaganda for or against the war, forms of discourse that had been nurtured as instruments of government and media power were frequently irrelevant or ineffective. Politicians, commanders, and diplomats all failed to increase public confidence or burnish their reputations with the different but mostly one-way techniques they used to talk about the operation. Without greater equity, arguments made on moral, rational, or authoritative grounds—

or even humble admissions that there were no easy solutions—all could be portrayed as a way to keep better arguments on the sidelines.

Traditional political and bureaucratic rhetoric also failed to improve the situation on the ground. Afghans who had to embrace America's vision of security would not be swayed by standard US government discourse that had developed to reassure voters, avoid legal liability, or protect an organization's budget. Afghans had limited use for American discourse designed to foster *esprit de corps* and patriotism in times of conflict or to hold officials accountable for waging war in the people's name. What Afghanistan needed was a *critical* discussion of interests, values, and methods that would help more Americans, Afghans, and others to take responsibility for a plan of productive action, whether that entailed more or less US involvement in the country. That discussion never took place.

Sustaining Legitimacy Through Process, Not Product

If the United States intends to fight for whatever outcome is still possible in Afghanistan, or if it intends to fight another war of choice in the years ahead, the strategy guiding that war should be a product of critical rather than instrumental discourse. This requires an effort to address all aspects of validity: whether the strategy is an appropriate way of advancing American interests and values, whether it is likely to produce consequences consistent with desired outcomes, and whether the elites making these judgments have the authority to do so. It is unlikely that these questions will be resolved before

leaders believe that action is necessary, but it is also clear that US strategy has suffered by setting the bar for validity far too low.

Specifically, national leaders cannot bypass issues of appropriateness and authority to delve into the details of tactical consequences. The most important subject of elite discourse about war, as Carl von Clausewitz argued, centers on the purpose and character of the conflict.¹² The great Prussian theorist also identified the sources of moral authority on which strategy must be based: the will toward violence within the people, the war's rational subordination to the policies of government leaders, and the freedom given to commanders and their armies to plan engagements and respond to unexpected or unpredictable developments.¹³ The practical implications of Clausewitz's advice is that leaders need to know first and foremost *why* they are fighting, and there needs to be a rough consensus on ends and means among politicians, generals, rank-and-file soldiers, and leading public representatives. The importance of appropriate political objectives and a harmonious division of authority and consent between the capital, the battlefield, and the public square are enduring features of modern strategy that must be respected.

What has changed since Clausewitz's time is the diversity of the authorities who must be convinced of the war's validity and how they become convinced. Clausewitz was closer in time and temperament to Louis XIV's supreme invocation of the legitimacy of centralized power—*l'état c'est moi*—than American leaders now can afford to be. If it ever was the case that civilian and military elites in the United States went to war with common interests and a shared conception of victory, that Golden Age is unlikely to be repeated.

¹² Clausewitz (trans. 1976), 88.

¹³ Ibid., 89.

Instead, America's wars now aggravate existing conflicts of interests—as when post-Cold War disputes over service roles and responsibilities or civilian control of the military re-emerged in Afghanistan as disagreements on the nature of counterinsurgency, the value of overwhelming force, the sanctity of military advice, or the wisdom of political deadlines. In a sudden war of necessity, opposing interests might be overwhelmed by a call to rally around the flag. In a decade-long war of choice, strategy must account for differences between elites.

Stepping outside disputes within the like-minded community of security experts, national interest cannot and should not be separated from concerns about the economy or the effectiveness of representative government that are affecting—and politically dividing—a growing number of American citizens. Announcing his decision to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan in December 2009, President Obama acknowledged as much when he quoted from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address. National security strategies, both Eisenhower and Obama affirmed, "must be weighed in the light of a broader consideration: the need to maintain balance in and among national programs."¹⁴

Yet the dangerous, unspoken assumption behind presidential warnings about the potential tyranny of a national security state is that priorities skewed by generals, defense contractors, or parochial lawmakers can be rebalanced by more enlightened and selfless people within the executive branch. There is no guarantee that officials within a particular administration or their expert advisers understand national priorities or specific security problems better than the other domestic elites whose support they need. Even when that is the case,

¹⁴ Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (December 2009).

an administration's vision and good sense may not be sufficient to inspire other elites to take action in favor of the president's policies. Wars of choice that are intended to coerce unhappy and violent foreigners away from activities that threaten Americans also need to take foreign interests into account. Perhaps the most frustrating feature of America's efforts in Afghanistan was that many leading Afghans were not interested in stability on US terms. The United States poses a significant challenge to itself when it fights a war of choice in which diverging domestic interests and the fate of other nations hang in the balance. It must figure out how to build a self-interested strategy around the interests of others.

To do this, American strategists must resist insularity and do a better job of bringing the right people together to discuss the right things before the nation makes any major decisions on the use of force. But questions about the value of broader discourse on strategy remain. Did the Obama administration not make a genuine effort to discuss its strategy through the many thousands of hours of meetings, briefings, speeches, press conferences, and other events the government hosted to exchange information and opinions about Afghanistan? Does the endless supply of news and commentary about the war represent something less than a serious public debate? If all this public discussion resulted in a flawed strategy, would *more* discussion risk making the strategy worse? After the dust of discourse settles, what assures us that there will be a better and more legitimate strategy in place?

The major insight of critical discourse theory is that legitimacy rests as much in the process of making strategy as it does in any specific plan of action produced by that process. Indeed, the process may be *more* important than the

product, because the meaning of any static statement of strategy is changed by events and individual interpretations. With respect to the Afghanistan strategy's July 2011 withdrawal deadline, for example, White House officials saw a guarantee against an endless, expensive commitment. Many Pentagon officials viewed the date as a bit of political theater for the Afghan and American people that—in terms of its real effect on military operations—simply set a milestone for assessing the effects of the surge. Afghans had to weigh the implications of a stronger US presence against the eventual end of that presence. News media by and large saw a deadline that framed the strategy as a race against the clock. A stable balance among these various interpretations required a process of communication that promoted trust. Elites needed to know that their interpretation of the strategy was valid. Barring that, they needed to understand why and how the intent or outcomes of the plan differed from their views, and how their concerns with those deviations would be addressed.

In the few cases where discourse opened up, there were signs of greater legitimacy. Although consultations with local leaders were time-consuming and sometimes confrontational, talks in Kandahar before the military build-up there produced more cooperation or at least less interference with pro-government forces than in previous operations. Afghan leaders who had access to information about night raids and detention operations remained highly critical of those activities, but they shifted their criticism from the illegality of the actions as a whole toward a desire to prevent mistakes and transition responsibility to Afghan forces. Outreach by senior US commanders helped alleviate some of their troops' concerns that COIN doctrine placed them at

unacceptable risk. Some of the better reports from Afghanistan—even while they did not avoid repeating stereotypes and conventional wisdom about their subjects—took pains to note that these intellectual shortcuts did not describe the full reality of life during wartime.¹⁵

Each of these examples indicated that better results were possible when elites expanded the equity of their discourse. Some government officials and journalists—perhaps conscious of how poor discourse had affected America's fortunes in Iraq—seemed to strive for more open, honest, nuanced, and empathetic communication about policies and events in Afghanistan. But where discourse mattered most in 2009 and 2010—the Obama administration's mapping of a revised strategy, the clarification of COIN doctrine, the explanation of the daily actions of soldiers and Afghans—damaging habits of communication were still common. Powerful individuals and groups rejected consensus and tried to control discourse by ignoring or discrediting the views of others in favor of their own. The process by which the government and its critics usually discussed strategy contributed both to the deficiencies of the plans they proposed and the unlikelihood that their discussions would produce better plans. This situation must change.

Recommendations

Reduce Government Secrecy. Efforts to improve strategy by improving discussion and understanding of strategic options among a larger number of elites starts from a common basis of knowledge, which in turn requires

¹⁵ For example, see the discussion in the previous chapter on E. Rubin, "Karzai in His Labyrinth" (2009), and Junger (2010).

government officials who are willing to share more information. Although there have been significant improvements in the transparency of military operations since 2001, the activities that remain most heavily shielded from public view—intelligence, special operations, prisoner detentions, and investigations of wrongdoing—still cause significant problems. An absence of information about these events lends credence to suspicions and falsehoods promoted by enemy propaganda or political opponents of the military mission. Perhaps more damaging in the long term, however, is how secrecy encourages elites to jump to conclusions when there are sudden, spectacular public revelations about secret activities.

The release of photos of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib in 2004, for instance, continued to generate assumptions about prisoner abuse that shadowed the effort five years later to transfer the US-run prison at Parwan to Afghan government control. Allegations about the killing of innocent Afghans during night raids in 2010 prompted a series of reports about special operations spinning out of control. Conversely, the killing of Osama bin Laden by US special forces in May 2011 encouraged defense observers such as US Representative Duncan D. Hunter to conclude that targeted killings were the only way to take “the fight directly to the enemy ... with a much smaller footprint” than COIN, relying “on the speed and efficiency of special operations forces” rather than prolonged nation building.¹⁶ Additional information about the exact nature of these operations—their effectiveness and their limitations—may inoculate more elites against categorical claims that government silence hides activities that are either supremely immoral or supremely useful.

¹⁶ Hunter (2011).

The potential value of better transparency in military operations is outweighed, some argue, by the attendant risks to specific missions, military personnel, confidential human sources, or technical intelligence capabilities. Public discussions of special operations are considered so hazardous that secrecy has become part of the function's official definition. Special operations, according to US military doctrine, often require "covert, clandestine, or low visibility capabilities," presumably because of their unique characteristics—defined as "physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets."¹⁷ Despite outreach to other government agencies and Congress as it has sought to become a larger and more effective force, the special operations community has increased the political risk associated with their work and decreased their ability to cooperate with some foreign allies by cultivating a mystique in which the secrecy protections that might be claimed reasonably on behalf of *some* missions have been extended to nearly all of them.

To set things right, defense officials must acknowledge that operational secrecy is a privilege rather than a class entitlement. In America's current conflicts there is little that remains special about special operations. Direct action against individual targets and cooperation with irregular foreign forces have become conventional methods of promoting national security. The amount of secrecy automatically granted to the forces supporting these activities therefore has become less justifiable. The essential elements of many special operations—small teams moving under cover of darkness, foreign

¹⁷ US Department of Defense, "Special Operations," in *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (2011).

informants, high-resolution satellite imagery, electronic eavesdropping, and the like—have been widely reported or imagined in American news and entertainment media. The bulk of special operations in America's major theaters of war are clandestine rather than covert, meaning that the secrecy required to protect the operation relates mostly to preserving the element of surprise. Details about the outcome of a mission only need to be withheld until after its completion would be obvious to enemy observers.

After-the-fact disclosure of information about special operations is frequently rejected out of concern for the safety of the forces and sources involved—an understandable but often unnecessary precaution encouraged by the mythology of special ops. In many cases, the outcomes of missions quickly become matters of public record whether the US government supports the discussion or not, which dispels the idea that special forces can preserve their effectiveness by somehow preventing public knowledge of their specific actions. Certainly the risk that identified personnel might become victims of retribution is also exaggerated. An ordinary company commander and tribal elder who are openly cooperating to drive insurgents out of a key village are equally lucrative and easier targets. Adequate protection for elite soldiers who cannot be identified by name can be maintained by preserving individual anonymity while still releasing many more operational details.

If the level of secrecy afforded to special operations is excessive, the level of secrecy maintained by the US intelligence community is sometimes incomprehensible. Intelligence cannot be conceived as a purely internal aid to government decision making, because such decisions are no longer purely internal to the government. The basic intelligence questions—who is the

enemy, what threat does he pose, and how effective are our efforts to stop him—are also the questions on which the legitimacy of the strategy to defeat that enemy depends. More intelligence therefore must be written and packaged for timely public release, with classification conferred only to information that exposes unknown collection capabilities rather than as a matter of bureaucratic habit or status. Classified intelligence reaches many thousands of government employees and contractors each day, and a few of these trusted agents make this information public in an effort to affect government policy. There are few good reasons that the government should not prevent this kind of gamesmanship by regularly releasing more intelligence reports and briefings on key topics after senior officials have finished with them.

Finally, elite discourse needs to respect the legal rights and responsibilities of US forces, but such considerations should not be abused to conceal patterns of elite misconduct or national policies that demand public scrutiny. Officials should verify assumptions that information about administrative discipline, active investigations, or matters awaiting trial is protected from public release by individual rights to privacy or a presumption of innocence. These assumptions often reflect the government's interest in avoiding embarrassment rather than true concern for the legal rights of the people involved.

Soldiers are given the moral authority to kill—and officials are given the authority to enact policies that result in killing on both sides—only through reluctant public consent subject to continuous examination and reflection. As seen in discourse on Afghanistan, senior officials are able to flex the rules of classification and other legal limitations on transparency when it is convenient,

such as when they want to publicize a particularly successful operation or ease political pressure for information about high-profile crimes. The legal limits of transparency therefore are not absolute. If the rules of classification, privacy, and due process can be loosened for selective political benefit, they can and should be loosened for critical elites who are seeking to understand the nature and consequences of American military action.

Focus Government Communication on Ensuring Equity, Not

Asserting Validity. In addition to excessive secrecy, the traditional methods of communication used by government officials are a second major area in which institutional norms do more harm than good. Taking cues from the marketing functions of American businesses and the partisan polarization of news media, assorted specialists in public affairs, public diplomacy, psychological operations, and other forms of government communication spend too much of their time selling unproven or ineffective policies. Conceived or executed in this way, government discourse becomes irreparably instrumental, a means of supporting or rejecting specific validity claims by controlling the flow of information through censorship and propaganda.

For example, one method of information control employed to poor effect during the Afghanistan strategy debate was the anonymous press leak. This technique has its uses, especially when individuals or organizations are withholding information they are obligated to release or when bureaucratic rules restricting communication are creating factual errors in public discourse. Too often in the case of Afghanistan, however, leaks were used to assert the validity of an arguable position through the unverifiable authority of an anonymous official with supposedly privileged access to information.

This is not to say that government officials should not promote their policies, but in terms of legitimacy among informed elites there is a difference between being the loudest voice in the conversation and having the most lasting effect. Government communication conceived as salesmanship treats arguing as a conflict of opposing monologues in which repetition produces conviction. This mode of arguing features forms of one-to-many communication such as policy speeches, official announcements, editorials, or press releases which present only a single position or version of events. Government communication operating as a monologue emphasizes keeping all officials on message. Leaders and bureaucrats display little tolerance for discourse that offers any interpretation of US strategy that differs from the president or relevant Cabinet secretary, even though no single statement of strategy can be completely definitive. Interaction, when it is allowed to take place, is often in the form of a press conference, where contrasting views or evidence are filtered through questions posed by reporters who need to maintain access to official channels of communication.

The outcome of this approach is often the dissection of government statements for shades of meaning that can be juxtaposed with conflicting statements from opposite camps. Since each side's statements are provided in the intellectual isolation achieved by talking to an invisible media audience against the unyielding opinions of an imagined adversary, there is no incentive for any party to change or moderate its views. The objective is to dominate opinion through the force of media presence rather than force of reason. The habit of communicating by monologue is so strong that when elites have a chance to talk to each other in news media, they frequently wind up repeating

their talking points to the audience without any real reference to the other person's point of view.

Such hucksterism is always undertaken to the detriment of the democratic government's primary role as a forum for responsible debate. Under this approach—analogous to programs promoting corporate responsibility in the business world—conviction comes from reflection, and individuals and organizations therefore focus on ensuring the equity of communication. Better equity is achieved by establishing and implementing procedures that maximize the inclusiveness of decision making, the autonomy of people participating in discussions, and the transparency of outcomes. Government officials still argue for their preferred policies, but those arguments are made through dialogues in which elites with diverging views engage each other on roughly equal terms.

Although no completely inclusive discourse is possible without ensuring strategic paralysis—and although power relationships ensure that no speaker ever talks with complete autonomy—it is not difficult to see how officials developing the revised US strategy in Afghanistan could have broadened their approach. In the entire 10 months between President Obama's inauguration and his announcement of the 30,000-troop surge, for example, there was no public forum in which senior or mid-level defense or administration officials discussed the proposed strategy in detail with prominent anti-war liberals or anti-interventionist conservatives. These critics—whose position grew stronger as progress seemed to stall in 2010—were mainly dismissed in the president's West Point speech with a straw-man argument noting the historical inaccuracy

of comparing Afghanistan to Vietnam.¹⁸ What inclusiveness and transparency there was in the strategy review was the result of efforts to affect the internal deliberations through outside pressure rather than by bringing more outsiders into the process.

In the future, the US government can take several reasonable steps to increase the equity of official discourse. First, officials must begin to exercise more diplomacy and military-to-military engagements in the public sphere rather than behind closed doors. There should be wider use of public conferences and meetings that produce statements of shared policy as well as opportunities for debate with less powerful partners and interest groups. These venues allow weaker actors to influence policy while making those actors more accountable for the policies they support.

Second, the United States needs to resist the common practice of providing political or material support for foreign leaders who say one thing in private and do another in public, which creates glaring lapses of equity that fuel unrest at home and abroad. For instance, there was immediate military value in allowing Pakistani officials to tolerate American operations against Taliban insurgents in Pakistan while publicly condemning the United States as a destabilizing presence in the region. However, evasive discourse by both governments that refused to discuss American actions and denied Pakistan's duplicity only increased distrust on both sides and deepened divisions between the Pakistani regime and its people on important questions of sovereignty and national policy. It is unreasonable to expect that all conversations with Pakistan, Afghanistan, or other parties will be conducted in the light of day or

¹⁸ Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (December 2009).

that US government actions will proceed with full public disclosure. But it is not unreasonable for conversations to begin with an assumption that the public knows what it suspects and that the effects of bad information cannot be corrected by staying silent or avoiding the facts.

A third remedy—the domestic policy equivalent of more inclusive and transparent diplomacy—would be public meetings in which US military and civilian officials at multiple levels develop, discuss, and defend their proposed strategy against the arguments of critical elites. Both President Obama and General McChrystal consulted legislators, current and former military commanders, diplomats, allies, international organizations, and academic experts in the course of defining US strategy in Afghanistan, but these meetings were fairly homogenous. Many of these advisors shared beliefs about American power that were actually sources of dissent within slightly wider civilian or military circles. The conformity of selectively sought advice therefore encouraged an illusion of elite consensus on issues such as the impossibility of a more rapid military withdrawal or reconciliation with the Taliban. Both of these options may have been untenable, but establishing *why* they were untenable would have required more public and detailed refutations. Instead, challenges to the strategy made by junior officials and weaker allies were often stifled by arguments from authority that dismissed dissent as disloyalty, ignorance, or arrogance. The secrecy imposed on expert consultations also ensured that other elites were unaware of difficult questions that may have been convincingly asked and answered along the way.

Political and bureaucratic veterans may argue that there is no benefit in talking to elites who hold opinions at odds with those of sympathetic national

security specialists, even if such dialogue is supported by officials whose time is less valuable than secretaries, ambassadors, or senior military commanders. Since it is difficult for COIN experts to agree on an acceptable strategy, for instance, it obviously would be futile to seek agreement between those experts and others who feel that foreign insurgencies pose no threat to US security. To extend the example, however, one would hope that policy makers have the humility to admit that although it may be dogmatic to oppose *all* COIN interventions there are clearly individual cases in which the country should adhere to that dogma and avoid involvement. But even in cases where leaders are convinced that they are right, they can benefit from openly engaging their staunchest opponents.

As the foundation of legitimacy in critical discourse theory, elite *ownership* of the strategy does not equate to universal *agreement with* the strategy. Opponents of a particular policy may own it simply by acknowledging that advocates of the policy have the stronger argument—an admission they can only make if they have had an opportunity to make their case. Policy makers may not care about bringing hard-core critics to this realization, but they should care about convincing skeptics that their plans can survive public dissection. Officials also should care about identifying potential problems with legitimacy early on and adapting their arguments and actions accordingly. Dialogue with opponents accomplishes both of these things in ways that more practical discussions with like-minded peers cannot.

Increasing the equity of government communication requires that some of the communicators on the government payroll should serve as ombudsmen rather than spokespeople. They should possess a reasonable degree of

independence, real powers to enforce healthy communication practices, and pedigrees that make them credible interlocutors with news media and other interest groups critical of their respective institutions. Fairer communication might also imply the redistribution of communication responsibilities or resources away from the Department of Defense—a point considered within the national framework for strategic communication submitted by President Obama to Congress under the provisions of the 2009 National Defense Authorization Act.¹⁹ Funded press operations, broadcasting, conferences, journals, and academic research can facilitate critical discourse, so these activities should not be curtailed without careful consideration. But the large imbalance between the number of people who are paid by the government and its corporate partners to discuss defense issues and those paid to discuss the work of other federal agencies also can amplify the already dominant position of military perspectives on strategic issues.

Revise Counterinsurgency Doctrine to Reflect the Reality of Limited Capability and Commitment. While the exploitation of government secrecy and the bully pulpit to advance personal and organizational interests pose problems common to most cases, Afghanistan points to particular problems with current American discourse about insurgencies. Defense officials have used the doctrine to drive organizational changes in favor of one or more specific capabilities, including infantry forces, special operations, human or signals intelligence, remotely piloted aircraft, and technology used to counter roadside bombs. Civilian and military elites have insisted that COIN requires greater national emphasis on the resources needed to promote diplomacy,

¹⁹ Obama, “National Framework for Strategic Communication” (March 2010).

economic development, and effective governance. It is the business of government organizations to make themselves relevant to current problems, so the appropriation of COIN doctrine on behalf of various agencies is not surprising or troubling. What is more disturbing is the way in which current doctrine channels discussions toward comprehensive solutions. By doing so, the doctrine ignores the necessity of making choices rather than providing guidance to make those choices.

The orthodox American response to the problem of insurgency is now a whole-of-government approach in which persuasion, money, and force operate in more or less equal measure at the same time toward common purposes. Too much of any one thing—violence without broad political engagement, infusions of cash without strict accountability and guarantees against corruption, diplomatic negotiations without military or economic developments on the ground—is considered ineffective. This philosophy promotes mutual respect among government entities, but it is not an especially reliable method for developing a global strategy.

Comprehensive COIN doctrine treats domestic political will as someone else's problem. Defeating an insurgency is a long and expensive proposition, it argues. Leaders need to be patient and either ignore public restlessness or spend political capital to nurture the level of fear, rage, or sympathy needed to sustain the war effort. But the doctrine actually complicates the problem of political will by equating COIN with nation building and military occupation. This represents a distortion of history, since weak actors in the modern era have lost at least twice as many conflicts as they have won, and insurgencies have been defeated with narrowly conceived strategies involving the brutal

application of military force or generous economic and political concessions.²⁰ The fact that American leaders have been unwilling or unable to adopt such narrow approaches in Iraq and Afghanistan does not mean that COIN, as a matter of doctrine, must always follow the comprehensive model.

One could argue that specifically *because of* the American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, future insurgencies will be approached in more limited terms by either avoiding military intervention, finding others to do the fighting, or if absolutely necessary going in heavy and hard. A doctrine that insists that the many emerging or full-blown insurgencies that might harm American interests each demand lots of people's sustained attention and effort over the long haul implies that lots of hot spots will be ignored. Military doctrine should acknowledge the real possibility of political resistance to comprehensive COIN and identify when commanders might responsibly offer more limited options, such as providing only military trainers, airpower, or intelligence support.

Overall, more work needs to be done across government to identify the threats posed by various forms of social revolution, state failure, and violent extremism. The end result of this analysis should be recommendations for addressing the multiplying threats of state instability on a global scale—which necessitates efficiency—rather than as unique cases—which presumes a situation where every agency has something in reserve to contribute. A global strategy for managing the current wave of social rebellion would include dealing with lesser threats defensively and allowing some violent upheavals to run their course without interference.

²⁰ Arreguín-Toft (2005), 3 and 31-32.

Have the Courage to Change. If nothing else, discourse on America's strategy in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010 should convince government, media, and academic elites that the current state of public discourse on foreign policy is completely unacceptable. While individual fortunes rose and fell during the Afghanistan debate, no one appears to have achieved what they wanted by communicating in the way they did. Nor can individual disappointments be said to have produced some sort of optimized result for the United States or Afghanistan, at least judging from the near-term results of the strategy. Democratic imperfections in public discourse and military strategy are inescapable, but American elites would be kidding themselves if they concluded that they could not do a better job.

Changing discourse on strategy requires a sincere willingness to listen to dissent and modify choices, rather than a determination to use discourse simply to justify those choices or avoid choosing. Opponents' perspectives do not need to be adopted wholesale into what might then become a radically modified strategy that generates greater public opposition. But opponents with the ability to affect outcomes must be able to rationalize at least limited support of leaders and their strategies with evidence that they can influence national decisions through dialogue rather than monologue. The most important aspect of a strategy's legitimacy therefore may be the way in which it maximizes the possibility of change until conditional support of actions leads to developments that justify firmer belief in the plan's objectives and methods.

What several participants and observers perceived as the end of strategic choice in the case of Afghanistan—the sense that there was no ability to develop and evaluate multiple courses of action—was a significant source of

dissatisfaction with the Obama administration's approach. Officials would be advised to reject discourse that argues that chosen strategies are the best possible alternative in favor of a process that demonstrates that the strategy remains improvable. This was the apparent intent of Obama's commitment to regular reviews of his strategy, but the proof lies in how as well as in whether such reviews are conducted.

Admittedly, there is only so much that government can do. In particular, much official discourse is a defensive response to systemic problems in news media—chiefly a reliance on anonymous sources and oversimplified narrative frames. While one can hope that journalists will recognize and respond to the ways in which reporting on the politics and violence of the war misinformed the elites who are their most reliable and important audience, government can take positive steps to encourage media reform.

Policy makers can employ the methods already discussed to make critical discourse on strategy an accepted part of the political process. When the conflicts of opinion inherent in critical discourse become a publicly observed feature of deliberation, there is no reason to suggest—as media reports on the 2009 strategy review did—that internal disagreements reflect a flawed process or product. Leaders also could make more unfiltered information available directly to the public as it becomes available, reducing the need for news media to rush to break a story with anonymous sources and pat interpretations of evidence.

Part of the government data made available to the public could be a running log of confirmed factual errors made by news outlets and reporters covering specific foreign policy issues, which may encourage greater media

accountability. As a last resort, officials can sanction the media representatives responsible for the grossest distortions by denying them access to interview subjects and other information. The reasons for naming and shaming reporters in this fashion must be objective and transparent. An error log or sanctions list would be exercised best through an independent panel of editors and reporters, with a similar peer-run appeals process.

As each of these recommendations suggest, reconceiving American strategy as a process of critical discourse requires steps that will reverse the worst effects of the institutional traditions and power politics that guide elite discourse on war. Critics will question whether such reversals are possible, and they will choose instead to use the Afghanistan case as further confirmation of their beliefs in structuralism, realism, or another theory of society and politics. The most important lesson of the Obama administration's first two years at war, however, is that communication structured around the assumptions of the traditional *isms* that inform US strategy proves to be the least helpful in devising effective ways to talk about military action. When elites rely solely on the privileges of power and organizational culture to talk about wars of choice, they wind up undermining their personal status and institutional credibility.

Although it might be naïve to recommend that elites resist some of the more obvious demands of power and culture in their discourse on war, the suggestion that they should avoid the attempt to do so is no less naïve. Leaders need to take political and operational risks for the sake of legitimacy if they want to avoid the harsher consequences of strategic failure. In doing so, they will face painful frustrations and embarrassments. But the more painful course

is to continue to abuse public discourse in ways that impoverish the facts and opinions needed to guide American strategy.



CONCLUSION

The death of Osama bin Laden at the hands of US special operations forces on 2 May 2011 was the most significant achievement to date in President Barack Obama's strategy to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat the al Qaeda terrorist network. After Americans took to the streets to celebrate the news, however, questions resumed. Officials backtracked on initial reports in which they had suggested that bin Laden and his supporters offered heavy opposition and used women as human shields during the raid, which killed three men and a woman in addition to the terrorist leader.¹ Experts debated whether the United States should provide photographic evidence of bin Laden's corpse and its burial at sea, with Obama finally opposing the move as a bit of triumphalism that would incite further violence.² Relations between the United States and Pakistan were challenged by a high-profile American military operation on Pakistani soil and the revelation that bin Laden had been living in relative comfort in close proximity to the Pakistan Military Academy.³

Obama attempted to put these and other developments in perspective as his self-imposed July 2011 deadline to begin a military withdrawal approached. The headline of his address was again numeric: the reversal of the surge announced in December 2009 through the withdrawal of 33,000 personnel by the summer of 2012.⁴ Obama asserted that "we are meeting our goals" and "starting this drawdown from a position of strength" without providing evidence.

¹ Booth (2011).

² Montopoli (2011).

³ Gall and Schmitt, "Amid Skepticism, Pakistan Calculates Its Response" (2011).

⁴ Landler and Cooper, "Obama Will Speed Pullout From War in Afghanistan" (2011).

Nor was it clear under what conditions the president would see himself fulfilling the commitment to bring America's longest war to a "responsible end" by 2014, or how the end of a billions-of-dollars commitment in Afghanistan would make a dent in the trillions-of-dollars priority to "focus on nation building here at home."⁵

Shortly before Obama's remarks, Afghan President Hamid Karzai told students in Kabul that the United States and other NATO countries were "using our country" for "their own national interests"—a statement that US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry said left Americans in harm's way "filled with confusion" and growing "weary of our effort here."⁶ The 12 July assassination of Karzai's half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, removed a corrupt impediment to effective governance in Kandahar Province, but it also removed a strong force for local security.⁷ Ultimately, it was difficult to determine whether Afghans were grasping for independence from corrupt leaders and a tired superpower or descending once more into political and social chaos.

What was clear by the summer of 2011 was that elites were discussing the strategy even less than they had before. Obama's withdrawal announcement came after little apparent internal debate and no public discussion. Whether by the military's choice or the news media's editorial stance, General David Petraeus and his subordinate commanders—who had been prominent public presences in the Iraq war—remained relatively invisible. The story of the most important military operation against Al Qaeda was told through sparse and uncertain second-hand accounts. Against this backdrop of

⁵ Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan" (June 2011).

⁶ Peter (2011).

⁷ Partlow and Sieff, "Ahmed Wali Karzai, brother of Afghan president, killed by trusted confidant" (2011).

subdued discourse, public statements by American and Afghan leaders seemed more like shallow rhetoric divorced from reality.

Keeping Afghanistan off the front page during a domestic budget showdown, a controversy over authorization for the war in Libya, and other crises may have been good tactical politics. But an end to public discussion of the operation was unlikely to produce a better exit strategy. Prioritizing the economic, political, and security challenges facing the United States involves more than cutting off the conversation on less important or more difficult issues in the hopes that elites will forget their reservations and move on. As a method of controlling the political agenda, avoidance only works until events conspire to make official silence look like official neglect.

Discussing the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem, Henry Kissinger concluded that “in the end, legitimacy involves an acceptance of authority without compulsion; its absence turns every contest into a test of strength.”⁸ It is significant that in his more reflective moments the master of American *realpolitik* makes these concessions to the enduring power of unforced rational and moral conviction. As the United States began its endgame in Afghanistan, too many elites treated public discourse as a test of strength to be won by rhetorical manipulation. They did not convince anyone. America needs a more responsive, transparent, and inclusive process for making strategy and explaining its actions. The country also needs leaders who have the courage to risk the loss of political and bureaucratic authority in the interest of achieving greater consensus with less compulsion.

⁸ Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (1994), 655.

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